

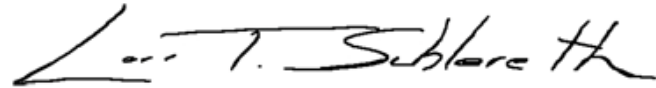
# British Theories of Mythology and Old Norse Poetry:

*A study of methodologies in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>  
to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*



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I, Lars Thomas Schlereth, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lars T. Schlereth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and a stylized 'H' at the end.

## Abstract

This study is an examination of the major theories concerning mythology that were popular in the United Kingdom from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and the ways in which they can be applied to Old Norse myth. The goal is to develop a greater understanding of how specific theories can or cannot be applied to certain mythological poems that are contained within the *Poetic Edda* collection.

The examination begins with the etymological approach of Max Müller and his applicability to *Alvíssmál*, *Skírnismál* and *Lokasenna*. It will be shown that Müller's ideas are difficult to apply, with only *Skírnismál* being particularly receptive. The next chapter examines the development of anthropological approaches, specifically that of Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang, and the content of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Völuspá*. These poems will be shown to have many indicators of the scholar's theories, but offer little insight into any larger, societal, functions the myths contained within the poems may have served. The third chapter focuses on the role ritual was thought to play in relation to myth and continues the examination of *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Völuspá* from the perspective of William Robertson Smith and Sir James George Frazer. Here, special focus is placed on the riddle-contest form of *Vafþrúðnismál* and the narrative surrounding the god Baldr that is partially contained in *Völuspá*. Finally, the study analyzes the theories of the Cambridge Ritualists and Bertha Phillpotts; scholars who posited that myths were derived from not only rituals, but ritual dramas. These final scholars will reveal that at the beginning of the twentieth century there was good reason to believe some of the *Poetic Edda* poems had a previous dramatic state, but more thorough research was needed.

The study concludes with a summary of scholarship that followed these academics and possible future avenues of examination.

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Theories Prior to the 1850s .....	7
The Academic Climate of Oxford and Cambridge .....	10
Terminology Used .....	11
Approaches to Old Norse .....	14
Approaches to Scholars .....	16
Chapter One:.....	18
Etymological Analysis.....	18
Max Müller in Context .....	19
<i>Life &amp; Reputation</i> .....	19
<i>The Etymological Argument</i> .....	21
<i>Differences between the Rigveda and Poetic Edda</i> .....	25
<i>The Narrative of Kephalos, Prokris &amp; Eros</i> .....	30
Alvíssmál .....	32
Narrative Details .....	32
Character Interpretation .....	36
Alvíss .....	36
Þórr.....	40
Natural Phenomena Terminology .....	45
General ‘Aryan’ Interpretation of Alvíssmál .....	47
Difficulties & Conclusions for Alvíssmál .....	50
Skírnismál .....	52
Narrative Details .....	52
Character Interpretation .....	53
Freyr.....	53
Skírnir .....	59
Gerðr .....	64
General ‘Aryan’ Interpretation of Skírnismál .....	67
Difficulties & Conclusions for Skírnismál .....	69
Lokasenna .....	72
Narrative Details .....	72
Character Interpretation .....	73
Loki.....	73
Niðrðr, Ægir and Heimdallr .....	76
Iðunn, Freyr and Byggvir.....	84
Þórr.....	89
General ‘Aryan’ Interpretation of Lokasenna .....	91
Difficulties & Conclusions for Lokasenna .....	93
Conclusions on Müller’s Etymological Method .....	96
Chapter Two:.....	99
Survivals & Totemism .....	99
Edward B. Tylor (Oct. 1832 – Feb. 1917) .....	103
Tylor’s Life & Works.....	103
Primitive Culture and ‘Survivals’ .....	104
Interpreting Vafþrúðnismál .....	108

Eclipses .....	110
Celestial Movement and Parentage .....	112
Disembodied Cosmography .....	121
Searching for Survivals .....	127
<i>Tylor's Problems and Snorri's Place</i> .....	129
<b>Andrew Lang (1844 – 1912)</b> .....	132
<i>Six Types of Survivals</i> .....	133
<b>Equality</b> .....	134
<b>Magic</b> .....	138
<i>Metamorphosis</i> .....	139
<i>Necromancy</i> .....	140
<i>Spellcraft</i> .....	143
<i>Like Affecting Like</i> .....	144
<i>Hereditary Abilities</i> .....	145
<b>Persistent Dead</b> .....	147
<b>External Qualities</b> .....	148
<b>Unnatural Death</b> .....	149
<b>Satisfied Curiosity</b> .....	151
<i>Examining Vǫlospá</i> .....	154
<b>The Narrator</b> .....	156
<b>Cosmography</b> .....	160
<b>Human Origins &amp; Tree Totemism</b> .....	162
<b>Magic</b> .....	168
<b>Baldr Narrative</b> .....	172
<b>Trees at the end of the world</b> .....	179
<i>Lang's Survivals In Old Norse</i> .....	182
<b>Chapter Conclusion</b> .....	182
<b>Chapter Three:</b> .....	186
<b>Ritual Origins</b> .....	186
<b>William Robertson Smith (Nov. 1846 – March 1894)</b> .....	187
<i>Church Controversy &amp; Anthropology</i> .....	187
<i>Myth and Ritual</i> .....	189
<i>The Example of Leviticus</i> .....	190
<i>Vafþrúðnismál as a Riddle-poem</i> .....	193
<b>Structure of <i>Vafþrúðnismál</i></b> .....	194
<b>Other Wisdom/Riddle Poems</b> .....	196
<b>Reconstructing the ritual</b> .....	201
<b>Sir James George Frazer (Jan. 1854 – May 1941)</b> .....	202
<i>The Early Life of Frazer</i> .....	202
<i>Examining The Golden Bough and Baldr Narratives</i> .....	204
<i>Fire Festivals</i> .....	207
<b>Solar Interpretation</b> .....	210
<b>Purification Theory</b> .....	213
<b>Frazer's Third Way</b> .....	219
<b>Fire Festival Evidence in <i>Vǫlospá</i></b> .....	220
<b>Fire Festival Evidence elsewhere in Old Norse Literature</b> .....	222
<b>A Critique of the Fire Festival Theory</b> .....	225
<i>Mistletoe</i> .....	227
<b>Magic Plants</b> .....	228

<b>The Mistletoe Specifically</b> .....	232
<b>Trees and the Oak</b> .....	238
<b>External Souls</b> .....	247
<i>The Baldr Component &amp; General Critique of Frazer</i> .....	249
<b>Chapter Conclusion</b> .....	252
<b>Chapter Four:</b> .....	255
<i>Dramatic Origins</i> .....	255
<b>Post-Victorian Oxbridge</b> .....	256
<i>The Academic Climate</i> .....	256
<i>Aristotle's Origin of Drama</i> .....	259
<b>The Cambridge Ritualists</b> .....	261
<i>Jane Ellen Harrison</i> .....	261
<i>Gilbert Murray</i> .....	267
<i>Francis Cornford</i> .....	272
<i>A Norse Eniautos-Daimon</i> .....	277
<b>Bertha S. Phillpotts</b> .....	284
<i>Life and Goals</i> .....	284
<i>Themes</i> .....	286
<b>Describing Events</b> .....	286
<b>Incremental Repetition</b> .....	288
<b>Supernumerary and Theriomorphic Characters</b> .....	291
<b>Stock Scenes and Disguises</b> .....	295
<b>Prose</b> .....	300
<b>Themes Critique</b> .....	304
<i>Constituent Parts of Drama</i> .....	307
<b>Actors</b> .....	308
<b>Chorus</b> .....	316
<b>Scene</b> .....	318
<b>Constituent Parts Critique</b> .....	320
<i>Summarizing the Nordic Material</i> .....	322
<b>Chapter Conclusions</b> .....	324
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	327
<b>Scholarship That Followed</b> .....	327
<i>Parallel Lines</i> .....	327
<b>Revived Indo-Europeans: George Dumézil</b> .....	328
<b>Magic: Neil Price</b> .....	329
<b>Drama: Terry Gunnell</b> .....	330
<i>Divergent Lines</i> .....	331
<b>Psychology</b> .....	331
<b>Structuralism</b> .....	334
<i>Poetic Edda Verdict</i> .....	336
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	339

# Introduction

In the past hundred and fifty years, a growing amount of interest has been developing around the analysis of mythology. The resultant scholarship has been diverse and often fiercely debated. However when applied to Norse mythology, many of these debate topics can only be found in classroom discussions and not in scholarly texts, at least not in a focused way. This is not to say that Old Norse mythology is an unexamined genre, for it is one of the most popular in western culture, but in the historical development of myth scholarship, the major figures that have shaped the discipline are largely silent on Old Norse topics. This thesis will begin to rectify that omission. The goal of this study is to examine the contributions to myth scholarship that were made by British scholars from the mid-nineteenth century up to the early twentieth and to test their approaches using select material contained within the Old Norse mythological system.

## Theories Prior to the 1850s

The analysis of myth was not a scholarly phenomenon that suddenly appeared in the later half of the nineteenth century. In fact, it has been a human intellectual pursuit for almost as long as there have been written narratives. For example Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth-century source for the bulk of Norse mythology that survives into the present day, appears at times to have been more than a chronicler of myth, being an interpreter as well. We have only to read the prologue to his *Gylfaginning* where he explains the historical origins of the Æsir to see an early scholar's example of myth analysis.<sup>1</sup>

By the nineteenth century, academic scholarship concerned with the humanities in a broad sense and myth scholarship in particular were being driven by certain identifiable trends. One of these is evidenced in the scholarly pursuits of theorists that this study will

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<sup>1</sup> Þórr, for example, is a descendant of king Priam of Troy. The legitimacy of Snorri as the author of *Gylfaginning*'s prologue is debated. See Byrge Breitag, 'Snorre Sturason og æsene', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 79 (1964), pp. 117-153 for a step by step progression through the arguments for and against.

examine. Victorian scholars dabbled in many different areas of academia, unlike the single-discipline scholars who would come to predominate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> For example, in a single published work, our first scholar Max Müller wrote on topics from the *Rigveda* to Comparative Mythology, West Highland folktales and the Indian Caste system. A scholar from the second chapter, Andrew Lang was an avid contributor to the national newspapers and is perhaps better known for his work on children's stories rather than mythology or religion. It should therefore be understood that the study of myth was not a defining or narrow academic discipline for most of the following theorists.

The second trend was a very strong sense of European cultural superiority, something exemplified by the idea that man had progressed from a savage state (which could still be seen in remote parts of the world) to a civilized one (European society being the prime example).<sup>3</sup> Working within this mindset, the students of mythology had come to the tentative conclusion that myth was the savage man's way of explaining the things in the world which he did not understand, or, for observers of those primitive societies, that mythology was a window into the savage mind.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Victorian scholars focused a lot of attention on what is now called Proto-Indo European culture, which at the time was called 'Aryan'. This culture is the supposed parent from which all Indo-European cultures (Anatolian, Greek, Indo-Iranian, Italic, Celtic, Germanic, Armenian, Tocharian, Balto-Slavic and Albanian) originated.<sup>5</sup> Among scholars, the basis for belief in the existence of 'Aryan' society came from the classification of Sanskrit and Latin as the linguistic parents of more modern languages such as Hindi and French. This generational observation led to a corollary theory that there were potential sibling similarities between Sanskrit and Latin as well, which suggested that they

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<sup>2</sup> Lourens P. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 491.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 10-14. Also see Stefan Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, trans. Sonia Wichmann (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 87-90.

<sup>4</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth account of the modern scholarship concerning Proto-Indo-Europeans, see J.P. Mallory and D.Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).



were likewise descended from a common source.<sup>6</sup> The ‘Aryan’ language is this hypothetical common source. The theory’s emergence onto the academic field is largely due to the work of Sir William Jones, a linguist who in 1786 proposed a parent language for Sanskrit.<sup>7</sup>

However, there was no evidence of a previous ‘Aryan’ society in existence for Victorian scholars to study. There were no linguistic documents, such as narratives recorded in the ‘Aryan’ language and there were no archaeological items, such as grave goods or architectural ruins. As such, scholars had to reconstruct the ‘Aryan’ language based only on the languages and cultures they believed descended from it. For example, if there is a Latin word for ‘farmer’ and a similar Sanskrit term for ‘farmer’, then scholars might conclude that the ‘Aryan’ ancestors had knowledge of farming and had a word for ‘farmer’ that would have been similar to both the Latin and Sanskrit terms. The basis of this Victorian reconstruction came in large part from an analysis of ancient Sanskrit texts, believed to be the closest literary remnants of this hypothetical ‘Aryan’ language.<sup>8</sup> Foremost among them was the *Rigveda* collection, a compilation of Sanskrit texts containing the religious hymns of early Hindus. The first scholar to whom we will direct our attention, Müller, devoted much of his life to the study of these texts, believing that ‘In the hymns of the Veda we see man left to himself to solve the riddle of this world. We see him crawling on like a creature of the earth with all the desires and weaknesses of his animal nature’.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the scholarship that had preceded the theorists examined in this paper, there was another important factor that influenced their lives and the way they worked. This was the institutions where they studied and worked.

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<sup>6</sup> Max Müller, ‘Comparative Mythology’ (April 1856), in *Chips from a German Workshop*, 2 vols (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1869-1871), II (1869), pp. 1-141 (pp.16-19).

<sup>7</sup> Garland Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 241-270.

<sup>8</sup> Max Müller, ‘The Veda and Zend-Avesta’ (October 1853), in *Chips*, I (1869), pp. 61-100 (p. 73).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

## **The Academic Climate of Oxford and Cambridge**

In order to keep the scope of this thesis manageable, all of the scholars examined will be ones who worked in a British milieu. Though not by design, this means our attention will be focused on scholars who worked within the academic climates of Oxford and Cambridge, two universities that had significant differences in their approaches to scholarship in Victorian times, especially as regards mythology.

Throughout this study, we will see a desire to explain origins; specifically how the tendency to create myth was linked to the development of human society, where the first seed was sown. As all of these theories are simply that, theories, and therefore incapable of being empirically proven, they are common centres of dispute. What is also evident is that the basic principles from which scholars formed their theories were influenced by the university environments in which they worked.

In the nineteenth century, Oxford required a BA candidate to study texts from the ancient world, but ‘these were read as an exercise in construing, with little concern for their contents’, and the University had recently ‘produced no outstanding antiquarians concerned with the ancient world’ since the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> One example of scholarly practices can be seen in the work of J.A. Cramer who, in the late 1820s and early 1830s, published seven volumes of geographical descriptions of the ancient Mediterranean world. Cramer did not base his descriptions on any first hand knowledge, but rather on library research and in his preface he stated that ‘the writer who follows so beaten a track must renounce all hope of communicating original information, and content himself with the humbler, though not less useful, task of giving publicity to the researches of others’.<sup>11</sup> While the authors examined in this study would not claim to have renounced the hope of contributing new information and ideas to the scholarly world, we will see the frequent

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<sup>10</sup> Oswyn Murray, ‘Ancient History’ in *The History of the University of Oxford*, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), VI, p. 520.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522.

tendency to rely on the accounts of others and little first hand research, especially in terms of anthropological data.

Cambridge had a paradoxical approach regarding the ancient world. While the fifty years following 1830 were ‘the pinnacle of Cambridge competitiveness’ in terms of the effort put into the study of the ancient world, the study of classics was greatly hampered by the administration of the University. Until the reforms of the 1850s, the examination rules were set by the mathematicians, who naturally favoured their own subject, so that any classicist had to achieve certain honors in mathematics in order to qualify for honors in classics.<sup>12</sup> While the the structure of undergraduate education is not the focus of this study, the point needs to be made that it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the study of the ancient world started to be seen as a complete academic discipline that did not need to be supplemented by first demonstrating excellence in other studies. Therefore, in many ways the scholars examined in this piece, while certainly exploring established topics, were doing so with a new freedom and any grand generalizations they are seen to have made should be considered with this in mind.

## **Terminology Used**

A brief introduction to the common terms used throughout this paper is also necessary. The word ‘myth’ has been popularized in the modern English language to mean a multitude of things that its strict definition probably should not include. For this study, a myth is meant to be understood as a narrative that contains supernatural beings, or ‘gods’, with the capacity for action that is outside the normal realm of possibility. The gods of these narratives must be the subjects of religious worship at some point in the history of the culture that developed them, even though the narratives themselves can be outside of any historical setting. This should be seen in stark contrast to a ‘legend’, which is a narrative of

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<sup>12</sup> After the reforms, the student still was required to sit for mathematics, but he only needed to qualify for an ‘ordinary’ degree. Peter Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), III, pp. 600-603. For an example of a student’s daily life, see the summary of William Everett’s routine on pp.591-612.

human characters doing things that are extraordinary, but still within a loose realm of possibility and often historically based.<sup>13</sup> In Old Norse literature, these are commonly referred to as ‘heroic’ narratives. In classical literature the trials of Hercules would be examples of ‘myths’ whereas the medieval adventure tales of King Arthur would be ‘legends’. Both of these terms fit into a large cultural umbrella that is often described as ‘folklore’. This term is also an evolving one, but it is sufficient to summarize it here as the collective components of a culture’s belief system. While we will make reference to various legend narratives throughout this study for examples of cultural beliefs, the goal will always be to understand myth analysis specifically and not folklore generally.

In a similar vein, a distinction needs to be made between the term ‘poet’ and ‘mythmaker’. Most of the mythological narratives we will be examining are works of written poetry; as such, their composers should be labelled as poets. However, one could (and many certainly do) argue that the form in which we have received, for example the Old Norse mythological poems, is not their original form, an assumption this paper takes as a given.<sup>14</sup> Thus it seems only fitting that, along with the scholars of this period who obsessed over the origin of things, we should use the term mythmaker rather than poet to describe the hypothetical original creator of the narrative.

Finally, in the interest of historical accuracy, this paper will often use nineteenth century terminology that has either fallen out of contemporary use or had its meaning altered due to subsequent historical events. The foremost example of this is the term ‘Aryan’. During the time period under our consideration, scholars using the designation ‘Aryan’ were referring to the hypothetical proto-indo European people that preceded all known European ancestors. Thus, the blonde haired, blue eyed stereotype that became associated with the

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<sup>13</sup> These distinctions are not always agreed upon depending on the scholar’s goals. For example, see David Leeming’s rationale for including the popular children’s tale of Brer Rabbit in his work on world mythologies. David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the forms in which we currently have the poems and the possible motivation of the crafting poets or compilers, see G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 14-21.

term as a result of the rise of Nazi Germany in the mid-twentieth century should not be considered in the arguments that follow.<sup>15</sup>

Another term that has fallen out of acceptable academic use is the designation ‘savage’. Historian Alan Barnard defines the Victorian use of the term as such:

‘Savage’ was not necessarily a term of abuse at that time. It simply connoted living wild and free. The prototypical savage was the Native North American who (although possessing ‘culture’ in the modern sense of the word) was, in the average European mind, closer to the ideal of ‘natural man’ than was the Frenchman or Englishman.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to its predominantly negative contemporary connotation, Victorian scholars did not necessarily use the term to convey barbarism or violence. The same could be said of the societal label ‘primitive’, a term also used by some of the scholars in this study. While these terms are considered to be politically incorrect in today’s parlance, the reader is asked to keep in mind that to Victorian scholars, particularly the two examined in the second chapter, these terms were not used pejoratively but were rather indicators of a society’s evolution. Therefore, emulating anthropologist George Stocking Jr., this paper uses such terms in an attempt ‘to recreate the thought world of scholars who took for granted their descriptive if not in all cases their analytic validity’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars such as Müller were largely responsible for the term ‘Aryan’s initial popularization in the English language. Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, p. 48. However, in the 1870s Müller himself became aware of the racist implications that could be found in his work. Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> George Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. xvi.

## Approaches to Old Norse

A fair amount of knowledge concerning Old Norse literature is assumed in the following chapters so as to keep the focus on how specific theories might apply. A short overview of the assumed knowledge is therefore needed.

The main source for Old Norse mythological narratives we will be examining is the *Poetic Edda*. This is a collection of poems that contain both mythological and heroic narratives, none of which have attributed creators. The original dates of composition are also unknown and a continued topic of scholarly debate.<sup>18</sup> The only relatively firm conclusion is that they must have been composed prior to the later half of the thirteenth century as this is when the manuscript that preserved the *Poetic Edda*, called the Codex Regius but labelled as GKS 2365 4to, is thought to have been written. The manuscript of forty-five vellum pages was discovered in 1643 by an Icelandic bishop who sent it as a gift to the king of Denmark in 1662, therefore accounting for its title. A few of the mythological narratives are also preserved in a second manuscript, labelled AM 748 4to, which is thought to have been composed slightly after the Codex Regius, possibly around 1300 C.E.<sup>19</sup>

The approach to formatting the Old Norse language in this study is based upon Gustav Neckel's 1927 edition of the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>20</sup> Most character and poem names are given as Neckel cites them and any variations will be noted upon their

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of previous dating arguments and contemporary ideas, see Joseph Harris, 'Eddic Poetry' in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. C. Clover and J. Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> The *Poetic Edda* is sometime referred to in older works by the title *Sæmundar Edda* because the bishop that found the manuscript, Brynjólfur Sveinsson, thought it had been compiled by the 11<sup>th</sup> century scholar Sæmundr Sigfússon. Modern research has disproved this possibility. A general introduction to both the Codex Regius and AM 748 manuscripts can be found in Terry Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 82-85.

<sup>20</sup> *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1962).

occurrence. Throughout the course of the paper, several English translators of the *Poetic Edda* will be referenced, however, the default will be Carolayne Larrington's 1996 translation due to the fact that it is the most accessible edition available to UK English readers.<sup>21</sup>

As has already been touched upon, when referencing the *Poetic Edda*, this paper accepts several assumptions but grants the fact that there is continued scholarly debate about them. Foremost among these is the legitimacy of the inclusion of prose at the beginning, within or at the conclusion of some poems. Some scholars believe that these prose sections are not original to the works that contain them, arguing instead that they are later interpolations by editors trying to fit things together better.<sup>22</sup> This study will treat the prose sections alongside the poems, as both are potential sources of support for the theories being examined. This is done not with an intention to advocate the validity of the prose sections, but because the scholars who will be examined in the following chapters would likely have made use of the elements contained within these prose sections. Some, like those of the fourth chapter, in fact relied on the prose for the very basis of their arguments. However, in most cases the analysis of Old Norse material will be my own and not the Victorian scholars'.

It will also become necessary at times to reference the work of Snorri Sturluson, primarily his *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* narratives that comprise what is commonly called the *Prose Edda*. This will be done mainly when a specific element of a scholar's theories relates directly to a similar element found only in Snorri's writings, but the intent is to keep the focus on the *Poetic Edda* as much as

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<sup>21</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Carolayne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). This edition is readily available in most major UK bookstores and through many online retailers.

<sup>22</sup> For example, A.G. van Hamel argued that the prose of *Lokasenna* was added by a compiler that was trying to reconcile multiple versions of the narrative into a single poem. A.G. van Hamel, "The Prose-Frame of Lokasenna", *Neophilologus*, 14 (1929), pp.204-214.

possible. Certain theories, however, can only function with the inclusion of Snorri's prose works.

## **Approaches to Scholars**

Each of the scholars examined in this paper have been included because they have had significant impact on how the English speaking/reading academic community viewed mythology, not only in their own time period but also as relates to the scholars that followed them.

The examination begins with Max Müller whose theories coincided with a revitalized interest in mythology. His etymological approach to the study of myth would become the starting point against which many future scholars based their own work. During and after the work of Müller, the fields of anthropology and archaeology were developing as was acceptance of the idea of evolution. The study of myth was part of these developments and this will be demonstrated by the work of Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang. Tylor's idea of societal survivals has become an integral component of anthropology and Lang's concept of myth as an indicator of a society's stage of development was instrumental in pushing the work of Müller out of the spotlight. These men were followed by Sir James Frazer, a man whose exhaustive work built upon both of theirs and suggested that there was a seasonal ritual behind the origin of many myths. Later scholars, classified by intellectual historians as 'the Cambridge Ritualists', continued this argument and attempted to show how myths could be seen as records of early dramatic, or even theatrical, productions.

As most of the scholars examined in this thesis did not deal specifically with Old Norse material, each chapter will begin with a summary of their theories with



reference to the examples they gave as evidence from the specific societies they studied. Following this, an analysis of specific material from the *Poetic Edda* that is most applicable to the given scholar's theories will be attempted in order to demonstrate the apparent strengths and weaknesses of that scholar's methodological approach when applied to the content of Old Norse myths.

# Chapter One:

## *Etymological Analysis*

The purpose of this first chapter is threefold. The overall goal is to introduce and examine the etymological approach to myth analysis that was made popular in the later part of the 19th century and laid the ground work for the many theories that were to follow. The main focus will be on the works of Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) and the theories he developed during a life-long analysis of the Sanskrit *Rigveda* texts. In his works, we will see two additional approaches to myth that he championed and later scholars reacted against. The first was an argument that the origin of a myth could be traced back to ancient mankind's observance of natural phenomena, which in Müller's theories was often the sun. In examining these potential descriptions of natural phenomena, Müller advocated a second principle, that an etymological analysis of the characters described in a particular myth could lead to an understanding of its meaning.

In order to explore these concepts in the context of Old Norse mythology, we will examine the three *Poetic Edda* poems *Alvíssmál*, *Skírnismál* and *Lokasenna*. *Alvíssmál* demonstrates a poem that has potential key ingredients for Müller's type of etymological analysis and *Skírnismál* presents a strong illustration of an Old Norse narrative whose overall frame fits within Müller's own examples. Finally, *Lokasenna* has been included to show the dubious extremes to which Müller's theories can be taken when trying to advocate an etymological analysis of myth as a means of demonstrating their origin in the observance of natural phenomena.

## **Max Müller in Context**

### *Life & Reputation*

Max Müller was born in December of 1823 in Dessau, which was at that time the capital of the Anhalt-Dessau duchy.<sup>23</sup> His father died when he was only four years old and he subsequently grew up with his mother in a continual state of mourning.<sup>24</sup> In 1835, young Müller was sent to Leipzig to study at the Nicolai school. Here he was trained in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, modern languages, mathematics and physics.<sup>25</sup> He entered the University of Leipzig in 1841 and studied under the newly established Chair in Sanskrit, Hermann Brockhaus (1806-1877). These university years laid the groundwork for Müller's later scholarship. He became interested in the Sanskrit *Rigveda* and an 1846 research trip to London resulted in the beginnings of a permanent residence in England. The following year, 1847, he relocated to Oxford to avoid the hectic London lifestyle, where he became a full-time professor by 1854 and was granted English citizenship in 1855. In April of 1856, he would publish his essay on *Comparative Mythology*, a piece that would excite the study of mythology for years to come. It is from this seminal essay that most of the following analysis is drawn.

It must be said that much of Müller's method of interpretation has fallen out of favour in modern times. This fall from academic credibility is in stark contrast with the esteem in which Muller's work was held in his lifetime, and the extent to which he was involved with the prevailing scholarship of his time. He was a highly regarded member of the Oxford faculty, who not only had an audience among his students and fellow scholars but was invited to give lectures to Queen Victoria on

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<sup>23</sup> Located to the south west of Berlin.

<sup>24</sup> van den Bosch, *Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> van den Bosch, *Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, pp. 18-19.

several occasions.<sup>26</sup> His biographers record that at times the attendees of his lectures on 'Aryan' religion were counted in the thousands.<sup>27</sup> He debated with Charles Darwin and provided advice for colonial forces heading to India; his popularity, at least in England, was bolstered by the fact that most of his theories helped to legitimize the power that the British Empire had over India and the rest of the world.<sup>28</sup> When Müller published his *Comparative Mythology*, it was reviewed by *The Times* as an 'epoch-making' essay that 'introduced into the field of Indo-European philology a hermeneutic method in which the etymology of the names of the principle actors in myths formed the main clue to discovering the original stratum of mythology'.<sup>29</sup> In other words, it was felt that Müller had found the formula for unlocking the original meaning of myths.

As time moved on, however, debate among the linguists who followed Müller developed over the interpretations of etymologies, casting a constant shadow of doubt over the usefulness of linguistics in the study of mythology. Myth analysis moved further away from language by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the work of later scholars such as Andrew Lang, who were not willing to write off the irrational aspects of myth—the murder, incest, promiscuity, for example—as merely a step along the path of linguistic development.<sup>30</sup> The twentieth-century scholar Richard Chase summarized the problems with Müller's theories as placing far too much emphasis on the language used by a culture instead of examining the social and physical environment that a particular myth arose from.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> van den Bosch, *A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> van den Bosch, *A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, p. 519.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp. 520-21.

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Chase, *Quest for Myth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), pp. 47-48 for an expansion of this criticism.

As already previewed, the second half of the nineteenth century also saw the rise of archaeology and anthropology in myth analysis. Yet this trend was something that Müller was not ready to embrace. While he would admit anthropological approaches could have their uses in expanding general knowledge, he remained adamant that, in the words of one of his biographers, 'Frazer worked his mine, and he [Müller] worked his...he would not admit that the notions derived from the observation of the religion of contemporary primitive peoples could be read back in to the old religions.'<sup>32</sup> In this way, Müller cannot be seen as a proponent of the Survivals concept that will be detailed in later chapters, or any other approach to myth based on contemporary anthropological data.

### *The Etymological Argument*

It cannot be overstated that the one concept that pervades Müller's scholarship on mythology is the importance of language to society, past and present. The development of language is tied to the development of mythology and Müller argued that only through an analysis of the language used in mythology could one unlock the true meaning behind it.

For Müller, the development of language as related to myth occurred in four periods. The first of these stages he called the 'rhematic period'. At this early stage of development, human beings only had basic root words for everyday objects and possibly counting terms. Each word in this period could have only one meaning. Anything resembling a 'language' would be an agglutinating process of sticking these simple roots together to make a secondary meaning. Once the language developed central rules for the agglutinating process, essentially a grammar system, it had then

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<sup>32</sup> Nirad Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller*, P.C. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), p. 380.

reached the 'dialectic period'. However, Müller believed that the human ability to reason slowly corrupted language and the terms that had one meaning in the first two periods were expanded into, or replaced by, terms which could mean multiple things. Here, in the case of nouns, which inherently had a gender, it would only be natural for the language's speakers to personify these nouns and give them anthropomorphic qualities, thus creating deities. This Müller called the 'mythopoeic period'. Finally, when the speakers of a language moved geographically apart, their language would change and as a result so would the names of their deities. This final stage Müller called the 'national period'.<sup>33</sup>

To put this in the perspective of the 'Aryan' people, one must first try to imagine being in the place of primitive man before any language or myths have come about. Try to imagine what it would have been like to see the sun rising and illuminating the environment and then disappearing behind the horizon each day without having any knowledge of solar rotation, the physics of light and heat, or any of the scientific explanations for the sun which people in modern times take as standard. In fact, at this point a person would not even have the linguistic ability to say 'the sun is rising'. Here in the initial rhematic period, all one could do is make a sound, a one word utterance, to represent their awareness of the phenomenon of the sun.<sup>34</sup> For the sake of a purely hypothetical example, let us say that utterance is 'bleep'. This person would not be limited to this single utterance, though; they would have different utterances for all the natural phenomena they observed. 'Bleep' could be the sun itself, but 'cha' might be their utterance for the ground they walked upon. However, they would only ever use 'bleep' for the sun, and nothing else. Over time their language would develop from these simple one word utterances to form

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<sup>33</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Müller's four periods, first see Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp. 8-12; and then Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, pp. 77-83

<sup>34</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp. 55-60.

complex phrases and sentences and once they had established a system for forming these phrases, they would be firmly in Müller's dialectic period. The utterances, such as 'bleep', would still be tied to their source. But as time passed for this 'Aryan' culture, they eventually would not be able to remember that 'bleep' was an utterance for the sun, or rather why they chose 'bleep' to convey the sun's meaning. They would begin to use the term 'bleep' for all different aspects of the sun. As such, they would be using the term 'bleep' metaphorically. For Müller this is the origin of mythology because, 'whenever a word is used metaphorically and without a clear notion of the stages by which it passed from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is danger of mythology. When the steps of the process are forgotten and replaced by artificial ones, we have mythology or, if I may put it this way, a disease of language.'<sup>35</sup> It was at this point, Müller believed, 'when this metaphorical meaning was forgotten, a personification took place and the word could be used for a deity to whom all kinds of anthropomorphic features could be attributed.'<sup>36</sup> This mythopoeic process amounts to the linguistic creation of the original 'Aryan' gods, who could be called 'bleep' and 'cha', or sun and earth (or Óðinn and Iqrð once the national period had been reached in Scandinavia), and to them would those people attribute aspects of the natural phenomenon that gave rise to the original 'word'. Not only would they develop gods for all of their metaphorical poetic utterances attributed to natural phenomena, their language would begin to describe the interactions between Bleep and Cha, sun and earth, in order to explain other phenomena both of the characters shared a part in, such as the sunset.

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<sup>35</sup> Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*. p. 86. For more on Müller's infamous 'disease of language' theory, see F. Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), I, pp. 68-70.

<sup>36</sup> Van den Bosch locates this quote in a particular published lecture of Max Müller, *The Science of Language*, 2 vols (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and co., 1875), I, pp. 432-480, however he provides no page number for it and I have been unable to locate it in my reading of the passage. Van den Bosch, *A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, pp. 262-3.

It was Muller's contention that eventually this primitive 'Aryan' society would split into the various Indo-European cultures. At the time of these fractures, his 'national period', the various peoples would have taken with them a belief in the 'Aryan' gods and their inherent natural phenomenal characteristics. Though different Indo-European cultures developed different languages, they still would have had an 'Aryan' sun god. The god's name might no longer be 'Bleep' but could become either a variation of 'bleep' (such as 'blip') or contain a new language's word for the sun (for example, if one Indo-European culture used the word 'dro' for the sun, they might have a god named 'Drogar').

As stated in the introduction, Müller and his fellow scholars had no literary evidence of the existence of an 'Aryan' mythology. Therefore, in order to understand the 'Aryan' mindset, his position was that we need to work backward through the mythologies that had survived from early Indo-European cultures, the offshoots of the 'Aryan' predecessor: Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, etc. Müller held that the key to understanding 'Aryan' mythology was the thorough interpretation of the names of gods who populate the surviving Indo-European myths. Through close analysis, he believed it could be demonstrated that these names had etymological links to natural phenomena and were therefore records of the original utterances used by the 'Aryan' peoples. Furthermore, when the interaction of the poetic representations of two different natural phenomena, such as the sun and the ocean, is observed, a hypothesis can be developed as to what the 'Aryan' speakers, or mythmakers, were originally describing with their primitive utterances (in this example perhaps sunset at sea).<sup>37</sup> Müller claimed the best evidence for his theories came from the Sanskrit of the *Rigveda* as it was able to bring 'us as near the

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<sup>37</sup> More often than not, Müller looked for references to the sun, primarily because he believed that the 'Aryan' people could not have helped being amazed at the daily course of the sun. Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp. 93-96.



beginnings in language, thought, and mythology as literary documents can ever bring us in the Aryan world'.<sup>38</sup> Any language descended from the original 'Aryan' stock would, he argued, also have the 'Aryan' fascination with natural phenomena hard-wired into it; the greater the distance in time from the original, however, the younger the language was in comparison to the hypothetical 'Aryan' original, the more likely it was that the articulation of fascination had become watered down or possibly confused due to misinterpretations over the years.<sup>39</sup>

### *Differences between the Rigveda and Poetic Edda*

The fact that Müller's theories are derived primarily from the Sanskrit *Rigveda* admittedly presents some significant problems for the general goal of this chapter in applying these theories to Old Norse material. The differences between the *Rigveda* and the Old Norse *Poetic Edda* are considerable and it is important to be mindful of at least some of those differences when trying to transfer theories formed from one, the *Rigveda*, to the other, the *Poetic Edda*.

First, one must take account of the difference in time and location. Current scholarship argues that the *Rigveda* was recorded around 500 B.C.E. but composed somewhere between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. and locates its place of composition in the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>40</sup> As noted in the general introduction, the *Poetic Edda* as a text is a thirteenth-century AD Icelandic creation. There is a strong and ongoing debate as to the actual origin dates of the poems that came to be contained within the *Edda*.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of how that debate resolves

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<sup>38</sup> Müller, 'The Veda and Zend-Avesta', p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp.106-11.

<sup>40</sup> Arvidsson, *Aryan Idols*, p. 45. Müller, however, believed its date of composition to be nearer to 800 B.C.E. Müller, 'The Veda and Zend-Avesta', p.72.

<sup>41</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Ursula Dronke, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-1997), I, p. xi-xii. Also see Gunnell, 'Eddic', pp. 82-100 and Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry*, ed.

itself, there still will be thousands of miles and thousands of years separating the two ancient cultures and the works emanating from them.

Second, the ancient Sanskrit and Old Norse languages, while both classed as derivatives from the supposed Proto-Indo-European language mentioned above, have massive differences between them. It is not the purpose of this study to delve into the complex grammatical differences between the two languages, so a simple examination of the forms and styles of each language's most important text will suffice for the purposes of demonstrating important dissimilarities regarding their view of, and relationships to, cultural deities.<sup>42</sup>

The *Rigveda* is an extensive collection of 1017 hymns in honour of the Hindu gods, written from the human perspective of a mortal worshipper, addressing the deities, asking for aid or intervention while giving detailed descriptions of both the gods and their attributes.<sup>43</sup> Consider this *Rigveda* appeal to the gods Indra and Agni and the numerous references to natural phenomena:

Whether ye be in heaven, O Indra, Agni, on earth,  
on mountains, in the herbs, or waters,  
Even from thence, ye mighty lords, come hither, and  
drink libations of the flowing Soma.  
If, when the Sun to the mid heaven hath mounted,  
ye joy after your nature, Indra, Agni,  
[...]  
Thus having drunk your fill of our libation, win us  
all kinds of wealth, Indra and Agni.<sup>44</sup>

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by Odd Einar Haugen (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1999), pp.104-186 for background on the dating theories proposed by various scholars from the past 150 years.

<sup>42</sup> This dissimilarity remains evident even when both are translated into modern English.

<sup>43</sup> Müller, 'The Veda and Zend-Avesta', p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> *Hymns of the Rigveda*, ed. and trans. by Ralph T. H. Griffith, 4 vols (Benares: E. J. Lazarus and Co., 1889-1892), I, p. 184.

The mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*, on the other hand, are a collection of narratives which, for the most part, have the Norse gods as their primary cast of characters. If one looks at an example, it can be seen that the focus is on the story and the interaction of the gods, not necessarily the attributes of the gods themselves. Also, in the above *Rigveda* example, the hymn was directed specifically towards the gods as an act of supplication. The *Poetic Edda*, however, is quite different. Consider:

Sér þú þenna mæki, mær  
mióvan, málfán  
er ec hefi í hendi hér?  
Höfuð höggva  
ec mun þér hálsi af,  
nema þú mér sætt segir.<sup>45</sup>

Do you see, girl, this sword, girl, slender, inlaid,  
which I have here in my hand?  
Your head I shall cut from your neck  
unless you say we are reconciled.<sup>46</sup>

In the Eddic poems, the gods are often active, speaking characters and the form of the narrative is often direct dialogue between the gods or other supernatural beings. This is a considerable difference from the *Rigveda* hymns: even though they are dedicated to and often address directly the gods, those deities are distant and do not take a dynamic role in the narrative.

Since it is the aim of this chapter to test the validity of a Müllerian interpretation of myths when applied to the texts of the *Poetic Edda*, it is necessary to do what Müller did not do. Specifically, this chapter will examine a selection of

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<sup>45</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, I, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.65.

three poems from the *Poetic Edda* and provide an interpretation of the gods who populate them. The problem mentioned above, the paucity of detail given to the description of the gods in the Old Norse poems, makes this a more difficult task than the one Müller chose for himself. The *Rigveda*'s long descriptions of the elemental properties of the gods works well as source material for his system of interpretation. In Müller's opinion, the *Rigveda* was mythology in a raw, unfinished state with myths 'springing up in wild confusion one by the side of the other, all differing in form, though all containing the same radical elements'.<sup>47</sup> He would likely say that the Old Norse material is a much more organized system and therefore of less use in reconstructing the original 'Aryan' ideas. Since depictions of the gods do not contain long descriptions of elemental properties, it will therefore be necessary at times, even though this study is focusing on three specific *Poetic Edda* poems, to extend the analysis to include other Old Norse material. The inclusion of this complementary material will help provide a more complete picture of the god(s) in question, specifically regarding the elemental nature of their name or character.

Even with consideration of this additional material, it must be conceded that it is still impossible to provide an etymological analysis of every Old Norse name, and Muller would not want us to force an analysis. As he says in his essay on comparative mythology:

It is in vain to attempt to solve the secret of every name; and nobody has expressed this with greater modesty than he who has laid the most lasting foundation of Comparative Mythology. Grimm, in the introduction to his 'German Mythology,' says, without disguise, 'I shall indeed interpret all that I can, but I cannot interpret all that I should like'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Max Müller, 'Lunar Myths', (1893), in *Chips*, IV, p. 332.

<sup>48</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 67.

Historical corruptions certainly contribute to the difficulty. Thus where etymology fails, one must look to deeds as well as words to understand what natural phenomenon the Old Norse deities originally represented. Müller certainly would have approved of this strategy, given his observation that multiple poets were likely responsible for the description of the gods that have filtered down to modern time, or as he put it, ‘As the conceptions of the poet varied, so varied the nature of these gods.’<sup>49</sup> But while it is possible to use sources outside the *Poetic Edda* to expand the pool of general knowledge, information from within the *Poetic Edda*, especially information specific to the three poems under consideration, or information gained from etymological analysis, will always be preferred over outside information.

While Old Norse is certainly a linguistic child of the ‘Aryan’ language (through its Germanic branch), Müller himself never made any detailed analysis of Old Norse poems, merely touching on Old Norse topics when they provided a quick example for a larger point he was trying to make,<sup>50</sup> or praising the work of another scholar who had devoted himself to the study of Old Norse.<sup>51</sup> Understandably, we cannot expect a scholar of mythology to discuss each and every mythological system the world has ever known. However, since Müller believed his theory to be universally applicable to the mythological systems of the Indo-European peoples, it should be applicable to the mythological poems contained in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*. While there are no ready references to be cited of his positions regarding specific Old Norse mythic material, one can legitimately infer what his position on these texts might have been by considering his positions on other, primarily Vedic,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>51</sup> Max Müller, ‘Popular Tales from the Norse’, in *Chips*, II, pp.217-236.

material.<sup>52</sup> In order to simplify the process of analysis, this paper will often refer to "Müllerian" themes or interpretation. This adjective is meant to indicate where an idea or interpretation is being formed in what could be considered to be the spirit of Müller's scholarship, as described above, but without specific testimony from Müller himself.

### *The Narrative of Kephalos, Prokris & Eros*

While an examination by Müller himself of an Old Norse mythological narrative would have been ideal, he did provide a good overview of the application of his interpretive technique towards a non-Sanskrit tale when he analyzed the Greek narrative of Kephalos and Eos. Müller summarized the story as follows: Kephalos was the husband of Prokris. They loved each other and vowed to be faithful. Eos also loved Kephalos, and told him so, but he rejected her because of his vow to Prokris. Eos accepted this rejection provided Prokris remained faithful to Kephalos, but believed that she would not. Kephalos accepted this challenge and approached his wife in disguise. He gained her love. In shame, Prokris fled to Kreta where Diana gave her a dog and spear (which never missed its aim). Prokris returned to Kephalos disguised as a hunter, and while hunting, Kephalos asked her to give him the dog and spear. She agreed to do so in return for his love, and when he has assented, she disclosed herself and was once again accepted by Kephalos. Yet Prokris feared the charms of Eos; and while jealously watching her husband, she was killed by him unintentionally with the spear that never misses its aim.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For an example of how potential 'Aryan' religious values can be found in Old Norse eddic poetry, see Otto Sigfrid Reuter, *Das Rätsel der Edda und der arische Urglaube* (Sontra: Deutsch-Ordens-Land, 1921).

<sup>53</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p.85.

Müller saw the narrative as having essentially four interactions. 1) Kephalos's love for Prokris; 2) Eos's love for Kephalos; 3) Prokris being faithless, even though her new lover is actually Kephalos; 4) Prokris being killed by Kephalos. He explains that Kephalos is the father of 'Tithonos', a sun deity, thus in the first interaction he is represented by the rising sun, 'the head of light'. Prokris's name relates to the Sanskrit 'prush' and 'prish', meaning 'to sprinkle', a reference to rain-drops. Therefore Müller held that the first interaction meant 'the sun kisses the morning dew'. In the second interaction, he argued that Eos should be understood as the dawn based on her relations with sun deities from other narratives, and therefore her love of Kephalos simply meant that 'the dawn loves the sun'.<sup>54</sup> The third interaction, Müller says should be interpreted as a poetical expression for the rays of the sun being reflected in various colours from the dew-drops, therefore Prokris may be said to be kissed by many lovers, even though they are all the same, Kephalos. The final interaction is 'the dew being absorbed by the sun', because, as Müller says, 'Prokris dies for her love to Kephalos, and he must kill her because he loves her. It is the gradual and inevitable absorption of the dew by the glowing rays of the sun which is expressed, with so much truth, by the unerring shaft of Kephalos thrown unintentionally at Prokris hidden in the thicket of the forest.'<sup>55</sup>

From this interpretation, Müller would have us hypothesize that the original 'Aryan' mythmaker was describing the sun rising in the morning and burning off the dew that had gathered over the evening. This over-arching interpretation can also be called the 'frame' of the poem, a term that will be used frequently in the following attempts to discover 'Aryan' heritage in the three *Poetic Edda* poems that are

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<sup>54</sup> It is odd that Müller chose to argue for Eos' place as a dawn representation based solely on her interactions with other sun representations when she is blatantly called the dawn by the sources. *Hesiod: Theogony*, ed. by M.L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp.115-116.

<sup>55</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', pp.85-87.

examined. It is also of note that within his own interpretation, Müller would blend etymological evidence with genealogical testimony in order to derive the conclusion. While in his early scholarship Müller held that ‘when there is no etymological foundation I should not venture to take a step, however clear the material coincidences of character, circumstances, and the general *dénouement* might be’, he would later admit that sometimes an interpretation required the use of ‘other methods when evidence of a common nomenclature was simply not available’.<sup>56</sup> As such, it is not a violation of Müller’s principles to use sources outside the three examined poems in order to derive a conclusion about them.

With all these things in mind, a Müllerian analysis of the three Eddic poems *Alvíssmál*, *Skírnismál*, and *Lokasenna* can begin.

## **Alvíssmál**

### *Narrative Details*

We begin our analysis of the Eddic material with the poem *Alvíssmál*. In summary, it is a dialogue between the dwarf Alvíss and the god Þórr. They happen upon one another during the night after the other gods have apparently promised Þórr’s daughter to Alvíss in marriage, without Þórr’s consent.<sup>57</sup> Þórr tells the dwarf that he will allow the marriage, but only if Alvíss can answer his questions. Alvíss agrees. Þórr then asks Alvíss to provide the names given by various races to a long list of natural phenomena, including the earth, sky, moon, sun, clouds, wind, calm, ocean, fire, woods, night, seed and ale. Alvíss provides Þórr with the correct

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<sup>56</sup> *The Life and Letters of the right honourable Friedrich Max Müller*, ed. by Georgina Adelaide, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), I, p. 364; and Van den Bosch, *A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, p. 251.

<sup>57</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 109.



answers, but the poem ends with the sun rising, a signal of the dwarf's doom according to contemporary commentators.<sup>58</sup>

*Alvíssmál* is a good starting point for Müller because of the natural phenomena terminology that it contains. Hypothetically, these terms might provide some links to 'Aryan' conceptions and manifestations of natural phenomena in Old Norse literature. However, as will become apparent in this section and in those that follow, the evidentiary value of these terms is slight as they are rarely used outside *Alvíssmál* and when they are used, they only supplement other, better evidence of natural phenomenon links. Even if these terms do not prove to have defining significance, *Alvíssmál* is still a part of the Old Norse mythological system and as such a Müllerian etymological interpretation of the two main characters' names should tell us something. The examination will reveal that while this too is difficult, it nevertheless provides a starting point from which to build on.

The text of the poem is contained only within the Codex Regius manuscript, and appears following the poem *Brymsqvíða*. According to its nineteenth-century translator, Henry Adams Bellows, 'it is apparently in excellent condition, without serious errors of transmission.'<sup>59</sup> Scholars such as Mogk, Sijmons, Heusler, Güntert and de Vries date the poem to sometime between 1150 and 1200 A.D.<sup>60</sup> However,

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<sup>58</sup>Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1993). This relies on the assumption that Þórr's claim to have 'beguiled' the dwarf by talking to him until the sun rose is an indication of the dwarfs doom. Nowhere in the poem does it suggest that Alviś is turned to stone by the sun, yet both of the above commentators argue for this. For further arguments, see *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, ed. by Klaus von See, Beatrice la Farge, Eve Picard, Ilona Priebe, Katja Schulz, 5 vols (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1997-2006), III, pp. 372-375.

<sup>59</sup>*The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Henry Adams Bellows (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; repr. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 183.

<sup>60</sup>In addition to Fidjestøl mentioned above on page 22, also see Lennart Moberg, 'The Languages of *Alvíssmál*', *Saga-Book*, XVIII (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), p. 310; Andreas Heusler, 'Heimat und Alter der eddischen Gedichte: Das isländische Sondergut', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 118 (1906), pp. 249-281; and Jan de Vries *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2 vols (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1941), II, pp. 122-124.

Finnur Jónsson and Boer argue for a much earlier date in the tenth century.<sup>61</sup> It is not the place of this study to say who is right and who is wrong, but the fact that there is no general setting agreed upon can only serve to hamper a Müllerian interpretation.

The narrative form of *Alvíssmál* is not unique within the Norse corpus, and it shares other similarities to additional works within the *Poetic Edda*. The poem is a wisdom contest, where two characters engage in a battle of knowledge. Oftentimes such a challenge is to determine if one participant is wiser than the other, with the loser sacrificing his life. Sometimes, as in the case of the *Alvíssmál*, a great reward hangs in the balance for the character whose wisdom is being tested.<sup>62</sup> The *Poetic Edda* contains other examples of this kind of contest, notably *Vafþrúðnismál*. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, the contest is between the deity Óðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir, rather than between the god Þórr and the dwarf Alvíss in *Alvíssmál*. A significant factor in the latter contest is its one-sided nature: Þórr asks all the questions and Alvíss provides all the answers. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, the dynamic is quite different: Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir take turns asking and answering questions until Vafþrúðnir is unable to provide a correct answer. Thus *Vafþrúðnismál* appears to be an example of a challenge to determine superiority of knowledge, whereas *Alvíssmál* is more properly a challenge to win a reward. In both poems, however, loss of the contest results in loss of life, assuming that one reads the final strophe of each poem as signifying the doom of Vafþrúðnir and Alvíss.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Moberg, 'The Languages of *Alvíssmál*', p. 311.

<sup>62</sup> For an introduction to the analysis of wisdom contests in Old Norse poetry, see Jan de Vries, 'Om Eddaens visdomsdigtning', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 50 (1934), pp. 1-59 and, though her focus is not on *Alvíssmál* specifically, see Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1-13.

<sup>63</sup> A topic that will be dealt with in more depth in the following chapter.

*Alvíssmál* is similar to *Vafþrúðnismál* in terms of content, as is true of the poem that follows *Vafþrúðnismál* in the *Poetic Edda*, *Grímnismál*. In *Grímnismál*, Óðinn once again appears as the supernatural protagonist and is recognized as the possessor or supplier of knowledge. The secondary characters of the poem never question the accuracy of Óðinn's knowledge so in this way the Óðinn of *Grímnismál* plays a role similar to the Alviss of *Alvíssmál*. What is of primary interest for the purposes of this study is the fact that in all three of these poems, the topics of the contests provide specific information on mythological and cosmological facts of the Old Norse world. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir discuss the names of historical locations such as the river that divides the worlds of giants and men (Ifing), or the battlefield where Surt and the gods will meet in battle (Vigríðr); in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn describes the names of halls in the lands of the Æsir. In *Alvíssmál*, Þórr asks Alviss to provide information regarding relatively simple cosmological concepts such as the earth, sky, and moon. Thus, the genre of Old Norse wisdom poems seems particularly well suited to Müller's theories. Since Müller's arguments are specifically about the names used for these concepts, *Alvíssmál* appears to provide us with a slightly better starting point than the other poems for the first example of an etymological analysis of Old Norse material, so attention will be directed there first.

In a Müllerian analysis of the *Poetic Edda*, the importance of the specific terms the Old Norse poet used in *Alvíssmál* to describe natural phenomena cannot be overstated. The flow and development of the story or narrative as a whole is of much less significance. While there is certainly a need to develop an over-arching frame in an attempt to explain the potential 'Aryan' origin of the poem (in other words the mythmaker, not the poet), the focus here is on what Muller could have

seen as Nordic linguistic evidence of an ancient observance of natural phenomena. We will start with an examination of the deities and then, when that has been completed, examine Alvíss' other terms in more detail. Strictly speaking, this analysis will not follow the standard Müllerian formula of interpretation, since in the narrative it will prove difficult to demonstrate the names of the deities involved are an indication of 'Aryan' natural phenomena observance. As suggested above, the terms Alvíss uses for various phenomena initially appear to be the best indicators for this observance; however, a close examination will show that few of these terms can be etymologically tied to Old Norse deities.

### *Character Interpretation*

Unlike the two poems that follow, especially *Lokasenna*, *Alvíssmál* has very few deities to analyze. In fact, other than the tiny references to 'Síðgrana', 'Dvalin' and 'Suttung' (none of whom ever make a physical appearance in the narrative), the only characters suitable for analysis are Alvíss and Þórr, and Alvíss is a dwarf, not a deity. It will be shown that connections to natural phenomena can be found for the Þórr character relatively easily. However Alvíss proves to be more complex.

### **Alvíss**

The character of Alvíss is unique to this poem bearing his name. The only other knowledge of him comes in quotations that Snorri attributes to *Alvíssmál* in *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>64</sup> The meaning of the name Alvíss is universally agreed to mean 'all-wise' or 'all-knowing'.<sup>65</sup> The adjective 'víss' appears frequently for 'wise' in Old Norse texts. An example of this is in *Vafþrúðnismál*: when Vafþrúðnir wants to

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<sup>64</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, pp. 89-90, 99.

<sup>65</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Bellows, p.184; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 109

describe the 'Powers' he calls them 'vís regin' or 'wise Powers'.<sup>66</sup> Making the point through repetition, the poet of *Alvíssmál* has Þórr preface each of his questions with the phrase 'öll of rǫc fira vorom ec, dvergr, at vitir' or 'I foresee, dwarf, that you have wisdom about all beings,' which not only continually confirms that Alvíss is in fact a dwarf, but more importantly that he has some all-knowing quality since the term 'vitir' is a synonym for 'vís'.<sup>67</sup> The way in which this relates to a natural phenomenon in order to explain the character via a Müllerian analysis is a problem. How does a connection to wisdom lead back to natural phenomena? One possibility might be that 'vís' is a corruption, a clerical error in transcription; could it be 'wind' rather than 'wisdom'? It would make sense that Þórr might ask then what terms all people use because the wind moves universally, goes everywhere, carries the breath of language, so to speak. But, there is absolutely no evidence to support 'vís' being a corruption of 'vindr', the Old Norse term for wind. Perhaps the fact that Alvíss was a dwarf holds some answers.

Of the supernatural beings contained within the *Poetic Edda*, dwarves play a relatively minor role in comparison to the gods and giants. They do appear on occasion in both the *Prose Edda* and the sagas. Yet, despite their small part, dwarves have a host of characteristics attributed to them. What is helpful to a Müllerian etymological analysis is that one of the best sources of information about Old Norse dwarves comes from the names that are attributed to them. In *Völuspá* and the *nafnáðulur* section of Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, there are extensive lists of dwarf names, many with etymological origins tied to natural phenomena. These include the cardinal directions 'Norðri', 'Suðri', 'Austri' and 'Vestri', the waning and

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<sup>66</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.52; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 46

<sup>67</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 125; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.110. Synonym is confirmed by Richard Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, rev. by Gudbrand Vigfusson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 718.

new moon 'Niði' and 'Nýi', the cold 'Frosti' and the wind 'Andvari' and 'Gustr'. For possible links to Alvíss, there are other dwarves with names relating to wisdom, 'Fjolsviðr' means 'very wise', 'Ráðspakr' and 'Ráðsviðr' both mean 'wise in council' and there is also a dwarf from the *Völuspá* simply named 'vittr', the other form of 'vís', a term used by Þórr in *Alvíssmál*.<sup>68</sup>

Another significant characteristic of dwarves is their connection to death or dead flesh. It is clear that Alvíss has some connection as Þórr asks him, 'hví ertu svá fóltr um nasar, vartu í nótt með ná?', 'Why so pale about the nostrils, did you spend the night with a corpse?'.<sup>69</sup> To this can be added several dwarf names, interpreted by the scholar Chester Gould, which relate specifically to either a dead body or a grave. Implicit in these associations are identifications with the earth. References include 'Nár' or 'corpse', 'Náinn' or 'like a corpse', 'Dáinn' and 'Dáni' or 'like one dead', 'Búinn' or 'prepared for burial', 'Eggmóinn' or 'slain by the sword', 'Haugspori' or 'howe-treader' and 'Þjóðreyrir' or 'buried in the great stone-heap'.<sup>70</sup> There are other names that potentially could be associated with death like those that are descriptions such as 'Uni' or 'one who is calm' which could be attributed to a dead body. However, they do not seem to contain anything etymological that implies as much and it should be restated that these English versions are interpretations, not literal translations. There are also names that refer to the apparent dark colouring of dwarves, such as 'Brúni' or 'dark brown' and 'Bláinn' or 'black', both of which are

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 963.

<sup>69</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 124; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 109.

<sup>70</sup> Chester N. Gould, 'Dwarf-Names: A Study in Old Icelandic Religion', *PMLA*, 44 (1929), pp.959-60. Keep in mind, however, that there is near universal agreement that the list of names in the *Völuspá* is a later interpolation and not original to the poem. Motz argues instead that most of these names are symbolic of ritual burials and burnings associated with the Christmas and Carnival seasons. Lotte Motz, 'New Thoughts on Dwarf-Names in Old Icelandic', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), p.105.

common colours of soil.<sup>71</sup> If Þórr's accusation was not enough, there is no doubt that Alvið has at least connections with the earth for he says in the third strophe, 'bý ek fyr iqrð neðan, á ek und steini stað', 'I live below the earth, my home is under a rock'.<sup>72</sup>

The final notable characteristic of dwarf names for this study is how they reflect the capacity for craftsmanship. Names of this variety include 'Draupnir' or 'goldsmith', 'Dori' or 'auger', 'Fjalarr' or 'splitter of panelling', 'Heptifili' or 'file with a handle', 'Skirvir' or 'joiner of herring-bone panelling', 'Brokkir' or 'man who works with broken fragments', 'Úri' or 'slagman' and 'Síarr' or 'he who makes sparks fly'.<sup>73</sup> These are significant because craftsmanship is the capacity to take natural material and transform it in some way, an attribute that will help to connect dwarves and Þórr in a later section.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to what one can learn from the names themselves, the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* both contain several excerpts that further illuminate the characteristics suggested by the dwarf names themselves. In the *Völuspá* it is stated that the 'regin' or 'Powers' formed the first of the dwarves out of a giant's blood and limbs: 'hverr scyldi dverga dróttin scepia, ór Brimis blóði oc ór Bláins leggiom', and that others were made 'ór iqrðo' or 'out of earth'.<sup>75</sup> Further in the poem, their ties to the earth are reiterated when the poet says, 'stynia dvergar fyr steindurom, veggbergs vísir,' or 'loud roar the dwarfs by the doors of stone, the masters of the rocks'.<sup>76</sup> *Reginismál*

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<sup>71</sup> This characteristic and the tendency to describe them as 'black' were also foremost in Grimm's interpretation of dwarves. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 3 vols (Gütersloh: Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1835), I, pp. 365-370. Bláinn may also refer to the color blue which in Icelandic is commonly connected with death or Hel.

<sup>72</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.120; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 109

<sup>73</sup> Gould, 'Dwarf-Names', p. 962; Motz, 'New thoughts', p. 106.

<sup>74</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the underground craftsman nature of Old Norse dwarves, see Lotte Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1983), pp. 87-130.

<sup>75</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp.2-3.

<sup>76</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 12; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Bellows, p.21. Note that Larrington translates 'veggbergs vísir' as 'princes of the mountain', *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.11.

shows the evil nature of dwarves when Andvari hides in a rock and curses his gold treasure against the designs of Loki and the Æsir: 'Dverginn gecc inn í steininn oc mælti [...] mun míns fiár mangi nióta'.<sup>77</sup> Hiding in a rock also reiterates the connection between dwarves and the earth and is a parallel to Alvíss' previously cited stated home.

Snorri contributes supporting evidence for the characteristics of craftsmanship and maliciousness. The latter is best described during his narrative of how the dwarves created of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*. Two dwarves, Fjalarr and Galarr lure away the embodiment of wisdom, Kvasir, and then kill him. The mead of poetry is made by mixing his blood with honey and anyone who drinks it will become a poet: 'Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjǫðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr'.<sup>78</sup> Examples of craftsmanship can also be found in *Skáldskaparmál*. Here Snorri explains how the dwarves are responsible for the gold hair of Sif, the ship Skíðblaðnir,<sup>79</sup> the spear Gungnir, a boar with golden bristles, the ring Draupnir and the hammer Mjöllnir.<sup>80</sup>

## Þórr

In comparison to Alvíss, Þórr is a much more common character in Norse literature, but just as complicated. Many aspects of his personality will be explored in later parts of this chapter, but with respect to his appearance in *Alvíssmál*, the main characteristic of Þórr to focus on is his apparent connection to the earth, providing a possible link between him and Alvíss.

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<sup>77</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 174.

<sup>78</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), I, p.3.

<sup>79</sup> The creation of which is also attested to in *Grimnismál*. *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.66.

<sup>80</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, pp.41-42.



The etymology of the name 'Þórr' is generally accepted to be the proto-germanic word 'þunar' or 'thunder' and at first glance appears to have no immediate etymological connection to any terms for earth.<sup>81</sup> This thunder connection will be further developed in a later section, but it is worth noting that, as Jacob Grimm pointed out in his exhaustive 19<sup>th</sup> century work, *Deutsche Mythologie*, there appears to have been a tendency among the early Europeans to associate their thunder gods with mountains. Grimm argued that this was evidenced by certain mountain names carrying the word 'thunder' within them. The best examples came from locations that would eventually become parts of modern day Germany, places such as 'Donnersberg', 'Thonerberg', and 'Thunerberg', but the tendency was not unknown in Scandinavia. On the island of Gotland there are at least two examples, 'Thorsklint' and 'Thorsborg'.<sup>82</sup>

Þórr's lineage functions as an extension of his character attributes, as well as the activities in which he engages. His mother was called 'Iðr' and Þórr himself is commonly called the 'son of earth' or 'Iarðar burr', for example in both *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*.<sup>83</sup> In one of the very rare instances where he discussed an Old Norse deity, Müller argued in his *Biography of Words* that this name "Iðr" was related to the Sanskrit 'Id' or 'Idā', both meaning 'the earth'.<sup>84</sup> Þórr's father is Óðinn by the former's own admission in *Hárbarðzlióð*, a link that will be returned to shortly.<sup>85</sup> Another important relationship, linking Þórr to earth, is his adversary, the

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<sup>81</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 742; and Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), p. 618.

<sup>82</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, pp.140-41. Grimm does not acknowledge the possibility that the mountains were simply named after the god and that there is no 'thunder' characteristic inherent in the mountains.

<sup>83</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp.108, 111.

<sup>84</sup> F. Max Müller, *Biographies of Words and The Home of the Aryans* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888), p. 192.

<sup>85</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 79.

'Jörmungandr' or world serpent that girdles Miðgarðr.<sup>86</sup> According to Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, the first encounter between the two was in the castle of Útgarðaloki where Þórr tried to lift a cat that was actually the serpent in disguise.<sup>87</sup> After the Útgarðaloki narrative, Snorri goes on to tell about Þórr's fishing excursion with the giant Hymir where Þórr attempted to pull the serpent into the boat but was unable to kill it before Hymir released it.<sup>88</sup> The final conflict between the two comes at Ragnarøk, where they cause the death of one another, a tale detailed both in the *Völuspá* and Snorri's *Gylfaginning*.<sup>89</sup> From these examples, there is a definite link between Þórr and the Jörmungandr, and the serpent's girdling of the earth and Þórr's relentless pursuit of the serpent further emphasizes Þórr's connection to the earth.

Associations that Óðinn brings to Þórr as his father provide additional insights and links back to characteristics already seen in Alviss. Óðinn is a very complicated figure in the Old Norse mythological system and, as we will see, can cause problems for any interpretative schema, Müller's being no exception. We cannot begin to examine all the aspects of Óðinn, but one is particularly important given the present investigation of *Alvíssmál*: Þórr's father has a very strong connection with death.

The best evidence for this, while also the most complicated, appears in strophes 138 through 145 of *Hávamál*, where Óðinn states: 'hekk vindga meiði á nætr nío, geiri undaðr ok gefinn Óðni, siálfr siálfom mér', or 'I know that I hung on a windy tree nine long nights, wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin, myself to

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<sup>86</sup> For an examination of the alternative constructions of the Old Norse cosmos, see Kevin Wanner, 'Off-Center: Considering Directional Valences in Norse Cosmography', *Speculum*, 84 (2009), pp. 37-51.

<sup>87</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 41-42.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44. The same story is told within the *Hymisqviða* of the *Poetic Edda*, which may have been Snorri's source. However, given the late date of *Hymisqviða*, Snorri may have been its source. *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 92.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13, *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p.50.

myself'.<sup>90</sup> Here we learn that Óðinn has both died and been the recipient of a death sacrifice. Interpretation of this passage is not straight forward because he is both the victim and the recipient of the sacrificial act, but one thing is clear: the character is connected to death. Later in the *Hávamál*, when Óðinn is commenting on his magical abilities, he makes additional connections to death:

Þat kann ek iþ tólpta, ef ek sé á tré uppi  
váfa virgilná,  
svá ek ríst ok í rúnom fák,  
at sá gengr gumi  
ok mælir við mik.

I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree,  
a dangling corpse in a noose:  
I can so carve and colour the runes  
that the man walks and talks with me.<sup>91</sup>

The ability to raise the dead is not contained in this source alone. In describing the historical figure of Óðinn in his *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri says of Óðinn that, 'en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga,' or 'at times he would call to life dead men out of the ground, or he would sit down under men that were hanged'.<sup>92</sup> Some commentators believe that Óðinn's ability to raise the dead is the backdrop of both the *Völuspá* and *Baldrs Draumar*,<sup>93</sup> which is certainly possible since the prophetess of the *Völuspá* calls Óðinn 'Valföðr' or 'father

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<sup>90</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.39; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.34.

<sup>91</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.42; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.37.

<sup>92</sup> *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXIV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1951), p. 13, and *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 45. Hans Hoachim, 'Die Toten in der altnordischen Literatur', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 8 (1933-1934), pp. 1-56.

of the slain'.<sup>94</sup> Finally, the poet of *Grímnismál* says in the fourteenth strophe, 'hálfan val hon [Freyja] kýss hverian dag, enn hálfan Óðinn á', offering a description of how Freyja and Óðinn divide the dead between themselves.<sup>95</sup> From these examples, it is not difficult to see why the *Völuspá* poet associated Óðinn as a god of the dead, and through this father figure, Þórr can be linked to the death characteristics already seen in Alvíss.

One final lineage issue to note is the significance of Þórr's daughter, the apparent source of the *Alvíssmál* conflict. Unfortunately, she offers little insight into the meaning of the myth, primarily because there is virtually no evidence of who she actually is. In *Alvíssmál* she is never referred to by name. In Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* it is said that Þórr can be called 'faðir Magna ok Móða ok Þrúðar' or 'father of Magni and Modi and Thrud'.<sup>96</sup> Later in the same work Snorri tells us that Sif, the 'konu Þórs' or 'wife of Þórr' can be called 'móðir Þrúðar' or 'mother of Thrud'.<sup>97</sup> Other narratives confirm that Magni and Móðr are males, so one can deduce from these excerpts that it was Þórr's daughter who was called Þrúðr. Etymologically however, this doesn't offer anything else since her name is only used in references back to Þórr.<sup>98</sup> The same name is used for one of the serving girls in *Grímnismál*, but other than the name itself and the feminine gender connection, there is no obvious link between the Þrúðr of *Grímnismál* and the one Snorri describes in *Skáldskaparmál*. In summation, all that can be tentatively concluded is that Þórr had a daughter called Þrúðr, and that a daughter of Þórr was the source of the conflict in *Alvíssmál*, but whether or not the two are the same cannot be ascertained. However, even if one could be sure it was Þrúðr in *Alvíssmál*, given the absence of any

<sup>94</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 1; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.4.

<sup>95</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 60.

<sup>96</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p.14 and 72.

<sup>97</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p.30 and 86.

<sup>98</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 747.

additional information regarding the name, this does not advance any understanding of the meanings or origin of the myth.

### *Natural Phenomena Terminology*

Before making an attempt to explain *Alvíssmál* in the context of natural phenomena, an examination of the numerous terms *Alvíss* provides needs to be undertaken. Starting in the ninth strophe, *Þórr* begins by asking *Alvíss* what thirteen elements or attributes of the Old Norse environment are called 'heimi hveriom í' (in each of the worlds). The answers to the questions create a list of words used by each of the different races in the Old Norse universe (men, giants, elves, *Æsir*, gods, *Vanir*, dwarves, *Hel* and 'Powers') to describe the natural phenomena common to them all. The phenomena in question are: earth, sky, moon, sun, clouds, wind, calmness, ocean, fire, wood, night, seed, and ale. It would have been most useful if *Alvíss* had been comprehensive in his answers, but unfortunately, he seems to choose, perhaps arbitrarily or based on the mechanics of poetics, which of the nine races' terms he will include in any one answer (in any particular strophe), never providing a complete set of references to all the terms of all the races for any given phenomena. It is particularly striking, however incomplete his responses are, that they are given almost always in logical pairs, with one notable exception. Earth is paired with sky, moon with sun, clouds with wind; however, as Moberg points out, 'night' is left unpaired. Its natural partner 'day' is nowhere to be found in the poem, nor is there a suggestion as to why this is the case. This is significant because a

‘day’ time period necessarily includes the sun and, as has been shown, the sun is a frequent source for Müller’s theories.<sup>99</sup>

There is not space to attempt an in-depth review of all the terms Alvíss provides, so only those that have especially strong applicability to Müller’s theories will be examined here. It will be shown that many of the terms can be understood as falling into one of three general groups. They can be a synonym (a different word or sometimes just a different spelling that means the same thing), a descriptor (a word that describes a particular aspect of the phenomena), or a kenning, (a word or group of words that refer to another word in a roundabout manner) such as how in *Lokasenna* the character Óðinn refers to Loki as ‘úlfs fǫður’, ‘wolf’s father’, referring to Loki’s fathering of the wolf Fenrir.<sup>100</sup>

Let us consider the term 'iqrð', meaning 'earth'. Alvíss provides the alternative terms 'fold', 'vega', 'ígræn', gróandi', and 'aur'. These can be translated as 'on the earth or ground', 'way or path', 'in full growth', 'the growing one' and 'moist earth or clay'. Next consider the term 'máni', meaning 'moon' which is also 'mylinn',<sup>101</sup> 'hverfanda hvél', 'seyndi', 'skin' and 'ártala', translated as 'the fiery one\*', 'a whirling wheel', 'the hastener\*', 'shiner' and 'year teller'. Following these, Alvíss provides references to 'sól' or 'sun', terms which should have obvious importance to any Müllerian interpretations made in future sections. The alternate words here are 'sunna', 'Dvalins leika', 'eygló', 'fagrahvél' and 'alseír' that translate to 'sun', 'Dvalin's trickster', 'everglowing', 'the beautiful wheel' and 'all-shining\*'. Then there is 'eldr' or 'fire' which is alternatively 'funi', 'vag', 'frekan', 'forbrenni' and 'hrǫðuð' that

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<sup>99</sup> Moberg, 'The Languages of Alvismál', p.300. Finnur Jónsson suggests that perhaps the 'night' section was originally the last section of the poem, to be followed by the stanza where the day begins and the dwarf is doomed. Finnur Jónsson, *Den Islandske Litteraturs Historie: Tilligemed den Oldnorske* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1907), p. 54.

<sup>100</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.95.

<sup>101</sup> De Vries, 'Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch', p. 397.

translate to 'flame', 'burner',<sup>\*</sup> 'harsh one', 'the burn down-er' and 'the mover'. And finally must be included the term 'bygg' or 'barley' which is 'barr', 'vaxt', 'æti', 'hnipinn' and 'lagastaf' that translate to 'barley', 'growth', 'edible thing', and 'head-drooper'. 'Lagastaf' is not directly translatable but may have been associated with the preparation of meals, given the prefix 'laga' which means 'to prepare or make ready'.<sup>102</sup>

Looking at this specific list, it should be noted that the alternative terms the poet has Alviss provide are often properties of the phenomena they are associated with, for example 'alseír' or 'all-shining' for the sun (descriptors). For one advocating Müller's theories, these terms have to be considered more than just casual alternatives; they are words deliberately used in reference to natural phenomena and as such, *Alvíssmál* appears to be a potential treasure trove of 'Aryan' data from the Old Norse perspective. Any characters who have these words incorporated into their names would, by Müller's arguments, be embodiments of the corresponding natural phenomena. It has already been shown that term 'iqrð' is instrumental in establishing Þórr's link to the earth and in the forthcoming interpretation of *Skírnismál* the alternative 'skin' for moon will be important, as will the term 'aur' for earth. Unfortunately, as will be seen as this investigation continues, these few instances do not develop into a trend. Most of Alviss' terms are confined to this particular poem and do not reoccur in other Old Norse literature, nor do they contribute to or expand upon any general knowledge of the Old Norse mindset.

### *General 'Aryan' Interpretation of Alvíssmál*

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<sup>102</sup> All of the English translations are my own, based on definitions found in Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, except those marked with \*, these are from *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 111-113.

In forming an overall interpretation of the poem, there are several factors that appear essential. Alvíss, by his name, is associated with wisdom. By virtue of his belonging to the race of dwarves, he can also be linked to other characteristics (death, darkness, earth, evil, poetry and craftsmanship). Þórr is also connected to the earth, through his mother, and in his mortal struggle against Jörmungandr. His identification with death comes through his father, Óðinn. Thus both Alvíss and Þórr have strong connections to earth and death. They also share a bond forged by craftsmanship: Þórr's main weapon, the hammer Mjöllnir, is crafted by Alvíss's dwarven kinsmen. Having established that connections exist between the two, can one establish a Müllerian explanation of the 'Aryan'-inspired thinking of *Alvíssmál's* poet responsible for this myth?

The narrative of the poem is a simple one: Þórr intentionally asks Alvíss questions through the night until the sun comes up and dooms Alvíss.<sup>103</sup> What does this narrative progression mean? Why would Þórr as a representation of earth, and in some ways death, want to kill Alvíss who is a representation of the same forces? Snorri states that this was not the only instance of Þórr attacking and killing a dwarf. In *Gylfaginning* Snorri tells of a dwarf called Litr who was kicked by Þórr into Baldr's funeral pyre:

Þá stóð Þórr at ok vígði bálit með Mjöllni. En fyrir fótum hans rann dvergr nokkurr. Sá er Litr mefndr. En Þórr spyrndi fœti sínum á hann ok hratt honum í eldinn ok brann hann.

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<sup>103</sup> For an overview of the ordering of Þórr's questions (and an argument that these questions are an instrument of magic), see Heinz Kingenber, 'Alvíssmál: Das Lied vom überweisen Zwerg', *Germanisch-Romanisch Monatsschrift*, 48 (1967), pp. 113.



Then Thor stood by and consecrated the pyre with Miollnir. But a certain dwarf ran in front of his feet. His name was Lit. Thor kicked him with his foot and thrust him into the fire and he was burned.<sup>104</sup>

One other reference to Litr appears in the twelfth strophe of *Völuspá* in a list of dwarf names,<sup>105</sup> but other than that and the brief comment in the *Gylfaginning*, nothing else is known of Litr or his connection to Þórr. But if it is accepted that Alvíss is killed at the end of the poem, it is possible that the death of one representation of earth at the hands of another was the poet's way of symbolizing a violent action of the earth, one that results in death. An earthquake would be one logical explanation, but according to the prose conclusion to the *Lokasenna*, that phenomenon is attributed to Loki shifting under the effects of poison: 'Þá kiptiz hann svá hart við, at þaðan af scalf iqrð qll; þat ero nú kallaðir land-sciálpár.'<sup>106</sup> This latter example shows an Old Norse poet who is describing the natural phenomenon that is tied to a character in a very clear cut manner, but this dangerously assumes that the prose of *Lokasenna* has always been part of the poem and was not a latter addition, something few would grant. But there is nothing to suggest that the *Alvíssmál* poet was the same as that of *Lokasenna*, nor has it been so argued. This may be two poets with two similar but ultimately different perspectives on the same natural phenomena as Müller was seen to suggest earlier.<sup>107</sup>

Finally, consider Alvíss's connections with darkness. It is known from the *Prose Edda* that the dwarves were considered to be the 'dark elves', as Loki asked dark elves, who were later called dwarves, to craft Sif's golden hair.<sup>108</sup> Their propensity for living in the ground or rocks, away from the sun has been shown and

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<sup>104</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 46; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 49.

<sup>105</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>107</sup> See page 22.

<sup>108</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 96.

there are several dwarf names which refer to darkness. While what exactly happens to Alvíss in the final strophe of the poem is debatable, it is a reasonable argument that the sun has some sort of negative effect on him. Furthermore, Þórr engaged in what can reasonably be interpreted as a prolonged interrogation, with the specific goal of making it last until the dawn when the dwarf would become subject to the effects of the sun. Therefore, there is a defensible interpretation that sees the frame of *Alvíssmál* as a struggle between darkness and light.

### *Difficulties & Conclusions for Alvíssmál*

There are a host of problems for a Müllerian interpretation of *Alvíssmál*. The first issue, so far unaddressed, is whether Þórr figures in the poem at all, thereby potentially invalidating any interpretation involving his characteristics. This stems from the belief of some commentators that the scribe of the Codex Regius replaced the character Óðinn with Þórr.<sup>109</sup> The argument is that Óðinn is the typical seeker of wisdom in Old Norse poems, and therefore it would have made more sense for him to be one of the main characters in a wisdom contest. Þórr as a corruption becomes one possible problem. Þórr as a figure of comic value is another. Commentators such as Simonetta Battista believe he appears in this poem in a comic role similar to that found in *Þrymskviða*. I think most would agree, however, that if this is the case, the humour is very well disguised.

A further problem is that while Alvíss provided information on a good number of natural phenomena, the value of this information for understanding other poems is marginal in an etymological analysis of other Old Norse characters. Most of his terms will not appear again for consideration, and as seen on page 33, he is

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<sup>109</sup> See Battista's discussion of the confusion between the character Óðinn and Þórr in Simonetta Battista, 'Interpretations of the Roman Pantheon in the Old Norse Hagiographical Sagas', in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization, 14 (Viborg: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), pp. 175-197.

silent about topics such as 'day' or 'fertility', which will be important in an interpretation of *Skírnismál*. Worse yet, some of Alviś's terminology will be seen to conflict with what is believed to be the meaning of other Old Norse characterizations, such as the connection between Loki and fire in *Lokasenna*.

The final problem is perhaps the most evident. Though it is possible to determine natural phenomena characteristics in both Þórr and Alviś, and one is able to make some connections between the two of them (such as earth, death and craftsmanship), there was no way to put together a comprehensive or even cohesive interpretation of how these characteristics and interactions formed an 'Aryan' perspective. The idea that the poem is simply about the struggle between light and dark and should be left at that is appealing. However this has problems of its own. It is hard to deny that Þórr plays a major role in the poem, yet in this interpretation, he has no clear natural phenomena tie. If he were a sun representation, there would be a nice dichotomy between himself (the sun) and Alviś (darkness), but there is no evidence upon which to posit that Þórr represents the sun, or even light, in this poem or any other in which he appears. Moreover, there is also contradictory name evidence for the dwarves' connection with darkness. A number of dwarf names actually signify light or brightness. Among these are: 'Blǫvurr' or 'the shining one'; 'Brísingr' or 'flame'; 'Dellingr' or 'the gleaming one'; 'Fáinn' and 'Fár' which mean 'shining'; 'Glói', 'Glóinn' and 'Glóni' which all mean 'glowing'. Even the name of the dwarf 'Litr', whom Þórr kicked into Baldr's fire, means 'colour' or 'red'.<sup>110</sup>

At this juncture, it is perhaps appropriate to consider the advice Müller himself gave in his essay *The Lesson of Jupiter*: if a poem is resisting an etymological analysis, it is far better to leave the poem unexplained than to try to

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<sup>110</sup> Gould, 'Dwarf-Names', p. 961.

force an analysis that would violate any linguistic rules.<sup>111</sup> One must therefore acknowledge the data and lessons learned so far and move on to the second Eddic poem.

## **Skírnismál**

### *Narrative Details*

The second poem to be examined is *Skírnismál*. It is a poem that, similar to *Alvíssmál*, has a limited number of characters but has been included in this study due to its much more developed narrative, meaning there is more of an overall plot to this poem than what was seen in *Alvíssmál*. Furthermore, it will be shown that a Müllerian interpretation of *Skírnismál* is much more plausible than what could be accomplished with *Alvíssmál*. Since solar phenomena figure prominently in Müller's interpretive schema, *Skírnismál* is an important Old Norse source to test his theories as there appears to be significant solar imagery in the poem.

Unlike *Alvíssmál*, *Skírnismál* has survived in two forms, first in the Codex Regius, and second in the manuscript AM 748 | 4to. Like many poems contained in both manuscripts, there are differences in the two versions of *Skírnismál*.<sup>112</sup> The complete poem is found in the Codex Regius following *Grímnismál*, but the poem only exists in fragments in the AM 748, following *Baldrs Draumar*. The composition date of the poem is, as was the case with *Alvíssmál*, very difficult to determine. It is possible that the poem was not composed until the twelfth or thirteenth century; however, it is also possible that some of the themes contained within the poem are reminiscent of themes from other ancient cultures.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Max Müller, "The Lesson of "Jupiter"", (1885), in *Chips*, IV, p. 399.

<sup>112</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 403.

<sup>113</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, pp. 400-402.

Both manuscript versions of the poem open with the god Freyr seeing the giantess Gerðr and falling in love with her. Freyr chooses to send a representative, Skírnir, to convince Gerðr to marry him. Gerðr is far from enthusiastic about the match and a substantial number of threats by Skírnir are necessary before she capitulates and agrees to Freyr's proposal. Skírnir then returns to Freyr with the news of his success. Snorri tells a slightly different version of the tale in his *Gylfaginning*, where he notably omits any mention of the lengthy series of threats.<sup>114</sup>

### *Character Interpretation*

As with the previous poem, *Alvíssmál*, first there must be a name-analysis of the deities involved in *Skírnismál*, followed by an examination of how they figure into the narrative frame of the poem.

#### **Freyr**

A logical starting point is the character Freyr who sets in motion all of the events of the poem. Etymologically, his name is thought to be related to the Old Saxon word 'frâ' meaning 'lord', but this provides no obvious link to any natural phenomena.<sup>115</sup> Though there are many deities in the Old Norse pantheon, there is often little evidence for their worship. Freyr is an exception with a well established cult following among the Norse. While the historical accuracy of the *Íslendingasögur* can and has been much debated, *Víga-Glúms Saga*, *Gísla Saga*, *Ögmundar Páttur Dytts*, *Vatnsdæla Saga*, and *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* all suggest that worship of Freyr was common among early Icelanders. These sagas also clearly

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<sup>114</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 30-31.

<sup>115</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 173. For a more in-depth Victorian analysis of the 'lord' etymology of Freyr within the Scandinavian-Germanic and Anglo-Saxon languages, see Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, pp. 173-180.

attest to the fact that the Icelanders tied Freyr specifically to fertility. The problematic *Íslendingasögur* are not the only links of Freyr to fertility: both the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda* contain supporting literary evidence. Recorded place names add further weight to the evidence of Freyr worship.<sup>116</sup>

From Snorri's *Gylfaginning* we learn:

Eigi er Njörðr Ása ættar. Hann var upp fœddr í Vanaheimum [...] Njörðr í Nóatúnum gat síðan tvau börn. Hét sonr Freyr [...] Hann ræðr fyrir regni ok skini solar ok þar með ávexti jarðar, ok á hann er gott at heita til árs ok friðar.<sup>117</sup>

Niord is not of the race of the Æsir. He was brought up in the land of the Vanir [...] Niord of Noatun had afterward two children. The son was called Freyr [...] He is ruler of rain and sunshine and thus of the produce of the earth, and it is good to pray to him for prosperity and peace.<sup>118</sup>

And in the *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri relates that Freyr can be referred to:

Svá at kalla hann son Njarðar, bróður Freyju ok enn Vana guð ok Vana nið ok Vanr ok árguð ok fégjafa.<sup>119</sup>

'By calling him son of Niord, brother of Freyia and him also a Vanir god and descendant of Vanir and a Van, and harvest god and wealth-giver.'<sup>120</sup>

Archaeological evidence also has been found that provides an indication of Freyr's importance regarding fecundity in marriage. Primarily across Norway, and often in close proximity to places associated with the name Freyr, thin gold foils, or

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<sup>116</sup> For a discussion of the *Íslendingasögur* as sources and Freyr fertility roles/place names, see Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 20-24, 61-62, 108.

<sup>117</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 23-24.

<sup>118</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), pp. 23-24.

<sup>119</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 18.

<sup>120</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 75.

‘guldgubbar’, have been found depicting a man and a woman embracing.<sup>121</sup> Dronke argues:

These are amulets offered to Freyr, pictures of his wedding with the earth, buried in the soil to ensure its richness in the coming year. Gold is Freyr’s metal, and it may have been a ritual requirement to have the tokens made in gold [...] It is possible that they represent the legend of Freyr upon which *Skírnismál* is based and record a ritual practice in his cult, the enactment of his wedding.<sup>122</sup>

Dronke’s argument that gold was ‘Freyr’s metal’ is plausible since both of the gifts that Skírnir uses in his attempts to bribe Gerðr, the apples which are ‘algullin (all of gold)’<sup>123</sup> and the ring Draupnir, are turned down because Gerðr states that ‘Era mér gullz vant / í gǫrðom Gymis (I’ve no lack of gold / in Gymir’s courts)’.<sup>124</sup>

Further references to the worship of Freyr from outside *Skírnismál* can be seen in horse references from Icelandic saga literature. The first is from *Hrafnkels saga*:

Hrafnkell átti þann grip í eigu sinni, er honum þótti betri en annarr. Þat var hestr brúnmóálóttir at lit, er hann kallaði Freyfaxa sinn. Hann gaf Frey, vin sínum, þann hest hálfan.<sup>125</sup>

Hrafnkel had one treasured possession which he held dearer than anything else he owned. It was a pale-dun stallion, with a black mane and a black

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<sup>121</sup> Ursula Dronke, ‘Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*’, in *English and medieval studies presented to J.R.R. Tolkien on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday*, ed. Norman Davis and C.L. Wrenn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 254. For more background, also see Magnus Olsen, ‘Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus’, *Maal og Minne* (Kristiania: Aschehoug & Co., 1909), pp. 30-31.

<sup>122</sup> Dronke, ‘Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*’, p. 255.

<sup>123</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 380.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381. Yet at the same time there is nothing to definitively confirm this. Also see Annelise Talbot, ‘The Withdrawal of the Fertility God’, *Folklore*, vol. 93 (1982), p.35.

<sup>125</sup> *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, *Austfirðinga Sögur*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1950), pp. 97-133 (p. 100).

stripe down the back. He called the horse Freyfaxi and gave his patron Frey a half-share in it.<sup>126</sup>

*Vatnsdæla Saga* mentions a horse by the same name:

Bradr átti hest fõxóttan, er kallaðr var Freysfaxi; hann var virkr at hestinum, ok þótti góðr; var hann ok øruggr til alls, bæði vígs ok annars; høfðu flestir þat fyrir satt, at Brandr hefði átrúnað á Faxe.<sup>127</sup>

Brand had a horse with a coloured mane called Freyfaxi. He was fond of the horse and thought it a good one; it was fearless in fighting and when put to other uses. Many people felt sure that Brand placed special faith in Faxi.<sup>128</sup>

Accepting this evidence that the horse was a symbol tied to Freyr, how does this connect to fertility? The answer comes from Snorri's *Hákonar saga Góða*:

Þat var forn siðr, þá er blot skyldi vera, at allir bæendr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fõng sín, þau er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeiri skyldu allir menn ǵl eiga. Þar var ok drepinn alls konar smali ok svá hross [...]skyldi first Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar.<sup>129</sup>

It was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the heathen temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it,

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<sup>126</sup> *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Stories*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 38. 'Dun', it should be noted, was originally an adjective to describe the colour of a horse's coat, typically in reddish, brownish and potentially golden hues, providing perhaps another Freyr-gold link.

<sup>127</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 1-131 (p. 90).

<sup>128</sup> *The Saga Of The People Of Vatnsdal*, trans. by Andrew Wawn, *The Complete Sagas Of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), IV, pp. 1-66 (p. 45).

<sup>129</sup> *Hákonar saga Góða*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla I*, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941), pp. 150-197 (pp. 167-168).



horses also [...] Óthin's toast was to be drunk first – that was for victory and power to the king – then Njorth's and Frey's, for good harvests and for peace.<sup>130</sup>

Snorri makes deliberate mention here of the practice of eating horse meat at festivals where Freyr was invoked for good harvests. Other narratives show further evidence of dedication to Freyr, leading Terry Gunnell to suggest that the cult of Freyr placed a special significance on the winter months because of the winter procession described in the fourteenth-century story *Ögmundar Páttir Dytts*.<sup>131</sup> The story follows the events around a man named Gunnarr:

Fór hann síðan austr um fjall ok um Upplönd, allt hulðu höfði; létti hann sinni ferð eigi, fyrr en hann kom fram austr í Svíþjóð. Þar vóru blot stór í þann tíma, ok hafði Freyr þar verit mest blótaðr lengi.<sup>132</sup>

Afterwards he went eastwards over the mountains through Oppland, hiding all the way; he did not break his journey until he got all the way east into Sweden. Great heathen sacrifices were held there at that time, and for a long while Frey had been the god who was worshipped most there.<sup>133</sup>

Later, Gunnarr is invited by the wife of Freyr to accompany her and Freyr (who is in the form of a wooden idol) as they travel to a winter feast:

Hon svarar: 'Vel líkar mönnum til þín, ok þykkir mér ráð, at þú sér hér í vetr ok farir á veizlur með okkr Frey, þá er hann skal gera mönnum árbót; en þó er honum illa við þik.'<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *The Saga of Hákon the Good*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 96-127 (p. 107).

<sup>131</sup> Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), p. 57.

<sup>132</sup> *Ögmundar Páttir Dytts*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eyfirðinga Sögur*, Íslensk Fornrit IX (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1956), pp. 101-115 (p.112).

<sup>133</sup> *The Tale Of Ögmund Bash*, trans. by John McKinnell, *The Complete Sagas Of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), II, pp.314-322 (pp. 319-320).

<sup>134</sup> *Ögmundar Páttir Dytts*, ed. by Kristjánsson, p.113.

She answered, ‘People have taken a liking to you, and I think it would be a good idea for you to stay here over the winter and go to the feasts with Frey and me when he goes to ensure good crops for the people – yet he dislikes you.’<sup>135</sup>

In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* we can see further evidence of the feasting:

Ok líðr nú svá sumarit, ok kemr at vetr-nóttum. Þat var þá margra manna siðr at fagna vetri í þann tíma ok hafa þá veizlur ok vetrnáttablót.<sup>136</sup>

Summer drew to a close and the Winter Nights began. In those days, it was the general custom to celebrate the coming of winter by holding feasts and a Winter Nights’ sacrifice.<sup>137</sup>

Freyr’s importance to these festivities is revealed later in the story:

Þorgrímr ætlaði at hafa haustboð at vetrnóttum ok fagna vetri ok blóta Frey [...]<sup>138</sup>

Thorgrim decided to hold a feast at the end of autumn to celebrate the coming of the Winter Nights. There was to be a sacrifice to Frey [...]<sup>139</sup>

The character Thorgrim’s full name was Þorgrímr Freysgoði. This apparent surname “Freysgoði” is actually a kind of Old Norse nickname or title that signified that he was a priest of Freyr,<sup>140</sup> a fact that further emphasizes the connection between Freyr and these festivals.

The convention of naming to suggest devotion can also be extended beyond personal names. In terms of place names, Turville-Petre tells us:

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<sup>135</sup> *The Tale Of Ogmund Bash*, trans. by McKinnell, p. 320.

<sup>136</sup> *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ed. by Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Vestfirðinga Sögur*, Íslenzk Fornrit VI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943), pp. 1-118 (p.36).

<sup>137</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, trans. by Martin S. Regal, *The Complete Sagas Of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), II, pp.1-48 (p. 11).

<sup>138</sup> *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ed. by Þórólfsson, p.50.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>140</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 172.

More than twenty names of which *Frey-* forms the first element, have been recorded in Norway. Two of these, *Freyshof* (Freyr's temple) in the south-east of the country, suggest public worship of the god in the last centuries of heathendom. There are many more in which the god's name is compounded with words for fields, meadows, etc, e.g. *\*Freysakr*, *\*Freysland*, *\*Freysvin*. The place-names containing the element *Frey-* are found chiefly in south-eastern Norway, perhaps because of the importance of agriculture in that region. The *Frey-* names in Sweden are far more numerous, and include many of the type *\*Freysvé* (Freyr's temple), *\*Freyslundr* (Freyr's grove), besides agricultural names such as *\*Freysakr*. Such names are particularly common in eastern Sweden (Svealand), and it seems that this agricultural district was for long the centre of Freyr's cult.<sup>141</sup>

Finally from the prose introduction to *Lokasenna*, which will be examined in detail in the following section, it is revealed that Freyr had 'þiónustomenn' or servants named Byggvir and Beyla whose names are etymologically linked to barley or corn (bygg) and cow (baula), both sources of sustenance for a community.<sup>142</sup>

Freyr is not the main character of *Skírnismál*, however, Skírnir is. Therefore the investigation must turn to him and then attempt to connect him with Freyr.

### Skírnir

In the *Poetic Edda*, Skírnir appears only in *Skírnismál*. He appears again in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* version of the *Skírnismál* narrative, but this is not the only time. Snorri also claims that Óðinn sent Skírnir to the dwarves in order to forge the fetter Gleipnir (which was used to bind the wolf Fenrir).<sup>143</sup> A Müllerian interpretation of *Skírnismál* is dependent upon a link of this main character to natural

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 168. Asterisks are contained in Turville-Petre's text.

<sup>142</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 96; *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 343, 345. At least 'baula' can be traced to other Indo-European languages. It bears some resemblance to the Sanskrit 'gaus' and the Persian 'gâu'. Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 161.

<sup>143</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, 1982, pp. 28, 31.

phenomena, and here a strong case can be made, because Skírnir has very strong linguistic ties to the sun. It also will be shown that Skírnir's ties to Freyr are more than just being his messenger.

The name 'Skírnir' has been variously translated by modern scholars as 'Shining One' (Larrington), 'Clear-Shining One' (Dronke), and 'the Bright' (Cleasby-Vigfusson).<sup>144</sup> Though there are slight differences between translators' opinions, the overarching theme of their translations involves a quality of light, providing a strong Müllerian indication of potential 'Aryan' heritage. This is reinforced by the etymological links that the adjective 'skírr' has to Gothic, Anglo-Saxon and German terms for 'clear', 'bright' and 'pure'.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the adjective is related to 'skína', the Old Norse word for the 'sheen or shining of the sun, moon or stars', a term found in *Vǫlospá* for example.<sup>146</sup> Even more significantly for this study, it is one of the terms that Alvíss provided in the *Alvíssmál* for the moon.<sup>147</sup> Müller himself never identified a link between Skírnir to any of his Sanskrit terms for brightness 'Argunî', 'Devá' or light 'Bhṛigu'.<sup>148</sup> However, by examining how 'skína' appears in the Old Norse literature, one can begin to understand how Skírnir might be seen as not only a messenger alongside of Freyr, but as a part of Freyr.

The initial indication of a close relationship between the two comes from the fifth strophe of *Skírnismál* where Skírnir says:

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<sup>144</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 404; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 61; and Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 550. Grimm called him a 'leuchtender engel' or 'bright angel', thereby demonstrating that his light characteristics were not lost on the Victorians. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, p. 282.

<sup>145</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 550.

<sup>146</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 1; Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 546. Note that the choice of whether to use the consonant 'c' or 'k' in transcriptions of Old Norse manuscripts varies according to the editor.

<sup>147</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 126. See page 42.

<sup>148</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 188-190.

Muni þína  
hykka ek mikla svá vera,  
at þú mér, seggr, ne segir;  
þvíat ungir saman vórom í árdaga,  
vel mættim tveir trúazk.<sup>149</sup>

I don't think your longing can be very great,  
if you, sir, will not tell me,  
for we were young together in bygone days;  
we two ought well to trust one another.<sup>150</sup>

However, the connection goes deeper than just being acquaintances and the word 'skína' plays a central role.

In *Skírnismál*, one of the conditions Skírnir imposes upon Freyr, in return for being his messenger, is the use of his horse that can traverse the 'vísan vafrloga' or 'flickering flame'.<sup>151</sup> The connection between Freyr and horses has already been established, but the identification of Skírnir, or rather the term 'skína', with magical horses goes beyond what we have identified previously. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, the giant host asks Óðinn, 'hvé sá hestr heitir er hverian dregr dag of dróttmogo?', or 'what that horse is called who draws every day to mankind?' Óðinn answers: 'Skinfaxi heitir, er inn skíra dregr dag um dróttmogo; hesta bestr þykkir hann með Hreiðgotom, ey lýsir mǫn af mari', or 'Shining-mane, the shining one is called who draws day to mankind; the best of horses he is held to be among the Hreið-Goths, always that horse's mane gleams'.<sup>152</sup> Here the term 'skína' is in full effect and being applied to the horse responsible for the day, specifically the bringing of the sun.

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<sup>149</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 68.

<sup>150</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 62.

<sup>151</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 68.

<sup>152</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 45; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 41.

The horse bears a striking similarity to the boar Snorri claims Freyr was given by the dwarf Brokk:

En Frey gaf hann glötinn ok sagði at hann mátti renna lopt ok lög nótt ok dag meira en hverr hestr, ok aldri varð svá myrkt af nótt eða í myrkheimum at eigi væri ærit ljóst þar er hann fór, svá lýsti af burstinni.<sup>153</sup>

To Freyr he gave the boar and said that it could run across sky and sea by night and day faster than any horse, and it never got so dark from night or in worlds of darkness that it was not bright enough wherever it went, there was so much light shed from its bristles.<sup>154</sup>

While 'skein' is not used in this passage, it does establish a connection between Freyr and an animal that travelled across the sky bringing light wherever it went, a strong Müllerian reference to both the sun and moon.

There are other examples of 'skína' linking Skírnir to Freyr. In *Grímnismál*, when speaking of the ship Skíðblaðnir, Freyr is called 'skírom Frey' or 'shining Freyr'.<sup>155</sup> Also consider the section from *Gylfaginning* cited above where Freyr was described as the ruler of 'skini sólar' or 'sunshine'.<sup>156</sup> Finally, as Dronke points out, the 'Skíringssalr' in Vestfold Norway 'is thought to be an ancient centre of Freyr worship',<sup>157</sup> an idea that fits well with other place-name evidence (such as 'Freysakr', 'Freysland', or 'Freysvin'), linking Freyr to agricultural areas in south-eastern Norway, as mentioned earlier.<sup>158</sup>

Several commentators on *Skírnismál* have disagreed about whether Skírnir and Freyr should be seen as the same individual. However many agree that the

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<sup>153</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 42.

<sup>154</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 97.

<sup>155</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, p. 64.

<sup>156</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 23-24.

<sup>157</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 404.

<sup>158</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 168.

natural phenomena being represented by both figures is the sun. The Norwegian linguist Magnus Olsen made the classic argument, when speaking about Freyr in *Skírnismál*, ‘hans tjener Skírne, hvis navn betyder “den straalende”, er kun en personification av én enkelt av gudens egenskaper; ti Frøi selv kaldes i et andet Edda-digt *skírr* “straalende”.’<sup>159</sup> Turville-Petre summarizes Olsen’s explanation of the poem as follows:

Freyr is the god of sunshine and fertility; he is *skírr* or ‘shining’, and his messenger, Skírnir (the Bright) is only another form of the god himself. Freyr, as is told in the *Lokasenna*, had two other servants, Byggvir and the female Beyla. While the name of the first is probably derived from *bygg* (corn, barley), that of Beyla has been related to *baula* (cow).

Gerð (*Gerðr*), whose name is related to *garðr* (field), personifies the cornfield, held fast in the clutches of winter, i.e. of the frost-giants [...] The god and his bride are to meet in the grove Barri. This name, it is said, derives from *barr* (barley).<sup>160</sup>

Dronke provides a refinement on this explanation, stating that ‘Skírnir can only be the sun’s ray personified. It is he, not the sun himself, who penetrates deep down to provoke the self-satisfied earth to wedlock’.<sup>161</sup> With this explanation, Dronke could be seen to advocate what the original mythmaker might have been trying to describe, the effect of the sun’s rays on the earth. However, before attempting an explanation of each character’s specific role within a natural phenomena interpretation of the poem, the final major character, Gerð, must be analyzed.

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<sup>159</sup> Olsen, ‘Fra gammelnorsk myte og kultus’, pp. 20.

<sup>160</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 174. For a summary of the arguments made against Olsen’s understanding of Barri, see Talbot, “Withdrawal of the Fertility God”, pp. 33-34.

<sup>161</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 399.

## Gerðr

Other than the role she plays in *Skírnismál*, Gerðr's only other appearance in the *Poetic Edda* comes in the thirtieth strophe of *Hyndlolióð*, which briefly summarizes Gerðr's relations and marriage to Freyr.<sup>162</sup> In Snorri's *Prose Edda*, she is mentioned once in *Gylfaginning* along with the summary of *Skírnismál* where she is described as the daughter of Gymir and Aurboða and 'er allra kvenna er fegrst', or 'the most beautiful of all women'.<sup>163</sup> In the *Skáldskaparmál*, Gerðr appears twice in lists of the 'Ásynjur' or 'goddesses' and then once more as Frigg's 'elju' or rival for Óðinn, though this may be a confusion with the character 'Gríð'<sup>164</sup> a giantess whose name means 'eagerness'.<sup>165</sup> However, in none of these references does Gerðr have the interactive, much less speaking, role that she has in *Skírnismál*.

Olsen's connection, mentioned above, of the name Gerðr to a term for field, 'garðr', provides a good Müllerian tie to natural phenomena; however, 'field' is only one possible translation for the name. Gerðr is related to the Anglo-Saxon 'geard', English 'garden', German 'garten' and Latin 'hortus'. It generally means an enclosed space, but has agricultural implications as well.<sup>166</sup> In Müller's own work, unfortunately, he only lists the Sanskrit 'ágra' and padá' and their derivations as terms for 'field', none of which appear similar to 'garðr'.<sup>167</sup> But Gerðr's mother, Aurboða, provides a strong earth link in the Old Norse. The first part of her name comes from

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<sup>162</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 287. Unlike *Skírnismál*, *Hyndlolióð* is not originally found in the Codex Regius, being instead in the *Flateyjarbók*.

<sup>163</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 30; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 30-31.

<sup>164</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 237; Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, III, p. 93.

<sup>165</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. 215-16.

<sup>166</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 191.

<sup>167</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 175.



the word 'aurr' which means 'mud' or 'wet clay'.<sup>168</sup> However, the critical association here is that 'aurr' is one of the specific terms Alvíss listed earlier for 'earth'.<sup>169</sup>

Gerðr's father, Gymir, has strong ties to natural phenomena, but in his case it is specifically to the sea. Snorri uses the name twice in the *Skáldskaparmál* as a synonym for 'sea', and in both of these he also lists 'ægir' and 'lqgr' as additional synonyms.<sup>170</sup> This addition is important because the word 'ægir' is used as an alternative name for Gymir in the introduction to *Lokasenna*: 'Ægir, er qðro nafni hét Gymir'.<sup>171</sup> From the short Eddic poem *Baldrs Draumar*, some commentators believe that waves of the sea are meant to be understood as the 'daughters of Ægir'.<sup>172</sup> Müller himself would likely reference the similarity of 'Ægir' to the Latin word 'æquor' which also means 'sea' as does the Anglo-Saxon 'eagor'.<sup>173</sup> Gerðr's link to the sea is also evident within *Skírnismál* itself. In strophe 6, Freyr describes her appearance: 'armar lýsto, enn af þaðan alt lopt of lqgr,' or 'her arms shine and from there all the sea and air catch light'.<sup>174</sup> Though this at first appears to be a suggestion that Gerðr herself is a sun representation, as will be detailed below, from Müller's position the light should be understood as Freyr's interest in her. From elsewhere in the poem it is known that she is in her father's home and since land is not explicitly mentioned by Freyr, the suggestion here could be that Gerðr is living in a sea setting of some sort.

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<sup>168</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. 33-34. Incidentally, the second part of her name, 'boða', relates to a command or direction, perhaps contributing to why Andy Orchard defines her as 'Gravel-bidder'. Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 71; and Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 43.

<sup>169</sup> See Albert Morey Sturtevant, 'Certain Old Norse Proper Names in the "Eddas"', *PMLA*, vol. 67 (1952), pp. 1158-1159 for an argument that Aurboða was meant to be understood as related to gold and wealth instead.

<sup>170</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 92, 123-124.

<sup>171</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 96.

<sup>172</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 111. The best example of this comes from *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. by Christopher Tolkien (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960), p. 40.

<sup>173</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 47; Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 758.

<sup>174</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 70; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 62.

The Nordic sun as possessing links to the sea was not an unknown concept to Müller; he himself says that 'in Old Norse, “Sól gengr í ægi”. Slavonic nations [...] represent the sun as a woman stepping into her bath in the evening and rising refreshed and purified in the morning.'<sup>175</sup> Müller further stated that the name 'Gymir' was linked to the Sanskrit term 'hímâ' which meant winter in a time-keeping sense,<sup>176</sup> similar to saying someone is 'X-winters old', the parallel being that the movement of the sun was used by many cultures as the first time keeping device.

In sum, it can be concluded that the common attributes associated with the specific name Freyr do not offer much help in advancing a Müllerian interpretation of this particular poem, since 'lord' has only a remote connection with fertility. But from Snorri, it was shown that Freyr was associated with sunshine, produce, the harvest and wealth.<sup>177</sup> Archaeological and place-name evidence suggest that the cult of Freyr was well developed and gold was an important element identified with him as well. The Sagas of Icelanders give evidence that the horse was important to his cult following, as were winter celebrations. And from *Lokasenna*, we know that the names of Freyr's servants further tie him to agriculture. So, while the name 'Freyr' is not swelling with etymological potential, the characteristics and reputation attributed to him by various Old Norse sources provide significant suggestions of ties to natural phenomena.

Skírnir's name, on the other hand, with its wealth of linguistic connections, is more appealing to a pure Müllerian interpretation. Its meaning, suggesting 'shining', has a direct connection to light. It is also tied to the natural phenomena mentioned by Alviss, and can be linked back to Freyr himself. Gerðr's name similarly has strong associations with natural phenomena. Her name specifically has been shown to have

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<sup>175</sup> Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 79.

<sup>176</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 192.

<sup>177</sup> See pages 53-55.

ties to the earth, as is true of the name of her mother, a name also mentioned by Alvið. Finally, her father's name-connection to the sea provides the setting in which she is placed within *Skírnismál*. While it was possible to assemble a similar amount of background information on Alvið and Þórr, which did not ultimately advance a viable Müllerian interpretation, one must ask, is *Skírnismál* any different?

### *General 'Aryan' Interpretation of Skírnismál*

What sets *Skírnismál* apart from *Alviðsmál*, and soon to be discussed *Lokasenna*, is that the etymologies of the character names fit very well into an explanation based on natural phenomena. As such, it is relatively easy to hypothesize what phenomena affected the original 'Aryan' mythmaker so deeply that he created this narrative as an expression of those thoughts. Assuming the acceptance of Müller's stages of society, one could posit that after the 'Aryan' people had dispersed, an Old Norse poet composed *Skírnismál*, perhaps in his mind as a retelling of a common narrative of his people, but in reality it is a reflection of the original mythmaker's mindset at the time of composition. This of course is a considerable leap of academic faith as the gap between the theoretical pre-historic split of the 'Aryan' people and the early medieval composition of *Skírnismál* is quite considerable.

The frame of this poem for a Müllerian interpreter could be seen as the daily course of the sun: darkness, dawn, travelling across the sky, sunset, and a return to darkness. The original 'Aryan' mythmaker might simply have been trying to describe the solar course of events he saw occurring each day, and *Skírnismál* is merely the Old Norse adaptation of that description. Time divisions can be seen in the following scenes. Darkness exists before dawn, when the sun's representation,

Freyr, is sitting in Hliðscíalf, looking into all the worlds, and is idle. Dawn itself is represented by the juncture where the sun first interacts with the horizon. In *Skírnismál* this is when Freyr catches sight of Gerðr, 'hann sá í Iðunheima, ok sá þar mey fagra, þá hon gekk frá skála föður síns til skemmo', or 'he looked into Giantland and saw there a beautiful girl, as she was walking from her father's hall to the storehouse'.<sup>178</sup> The poet further emphasizes this point by having Gerðr shine with light when Freyr looks upon her, 'armar lýsto, enn af þaðan alt lopt ok lōgr'.<sup>179</sup> Müller believed that the name Gerðr was linked to the Sanskrit 'Harítas' which symbolized the 'light of morning',<sup>180</sup> which provides a further reason to see her as the dawn. The poet then personifies his word for the rays or shining of the sun, which is 'Skírnir' in Old Norse, and sets this personification travelling across the sky on his journey to the home of the horizon, Iðunheim for the Old Norse poet. Thus we have a story of the sun's daily path.

Sunset could be the natural phenomena behind possibly one or two events in the poem. The first is Skírnir's crossing of the 'vísan vafroga' or 'flickering flame' that is first mentioned in strophe eight and implied again between strophes eleven and seventeen. The second interaction is the lengthy battle of words that takes place between the solar representation, Skírnir, and the representation of the horizon, Gerðr. Without knowledge of solar rotation, the round nature of the world, and the rules of physics that assure it would happen without fail again and again, it is not difficult to imagine just how astonishing it was for the ancient mythmaker to see the

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<sup>178</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 67; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 61.

<sup>179</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 68; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 62. This detail raises the possibility that either the 'Aryan' mythmaker or the Old Norse poet was from a coastal people, as was true of many early Nordic settlements, and that he is describing the sun emerging from the horizon across the sea. I use the word 'horizon' rather than 'ground' in this case because, as has been shown, Gerðr's name has links both to the earth and to the sea; we cannot be sure what the original 'Aryan' setting was.

<sup>180</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 192.

primary source of heat and light travel across the sky, watching it come crashing into the western horizon at a long day's end with a dramatic, fiery display of colours, much like a wall of flame, waiting and wondering if it would ever come again.<sup>181</sup>

Conflict between the elements might also indicate a sense of fearfulness or trepidation on the part of the mythmaker about sunset (the loss of the sun) or the ensuing darkness (loss of heat as well as light). Finally, the darkness of the night itself could be seen as the waiting period that the sun (Freyr) must endure until he sees the horizon (Gerðr) again. He laments in strophe 42, 'lǫng er nótt, langar ro tvær, hvé um þreyiak þriár', or 'long is one night, long are two, how shall I bear three'.<sup>182</sup> The poet might be reinforcing the worry that comes in the darkness of every night, or he may be commenting on the long nights in the Nordic countries during the winter, or perhaps both.

### *Difficulties & Conclusions for Skírnismál*

There are several problems with this Müllerian interpretation of *Skírnismál*. After the lack of any credible evidence to support a Müllerian interpretation of *Alvíssmál*, it certainly is preferable to have what appears to be at least the makings of a plausible explanation for *Skírnismál*, but there are still some significant problems. First, it is not possible to trace etymologically any of the above conclusions about Freyr or Skírnir back to any 'Aryan' terms listed by Müller himself. Secondly, the interpretation, as is true of many of Müller's, has left out considerable components of the narrative that are specific enough to suggest they were included for some deliberate purpose. Specifically, there is no explanation within this interpretive

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<sup>181</sup> This does assume a very romantic ideal of the supposed mythmaker and discounts the human tendency to become complacent with everyday occurrences as they repeat themselves.

<sup>182</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 74; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 68.

frame of a crucial element that propels the action of the story: the sword or 'taming wand' that Skírnir uses to reinforce his threats.

Worse yet, strophe ten in particular poses a significant problem to an interpretation that this is the story of the sun's travel across the sky culminating in sunset. Consider the words Skírnir uses in addressing Freyr's horse before departing on his journey: 'myrkt er úti, mál kveð ek okkr fara úrig fiðll yfir', or 'it is dark outside, I declare it's time for us to go over the dewy mountain'.<sup>183</sup> Modern translators agree that 'myrkt er úti' means that the poet has Skírnir state that it is dark outside already,<sup>184</sup> not that it is becoming dark (which would herald the sunset nicely). But if it is already night, if sunset is in the past, then the Müllerian interpretation put forward in the previous section only has validity if we see this passage of the poem as a historical corruption, because sunset cannot happen twice.

A second problem involves Gerðr. She never leaves her home among the giants but our interpretation has her playing a role in both the sunrise and the sunset. Surely even the ancient mythmaker would need to distinguish the geographical distinctions between the sun rising from one direction and setting in another. Perhaps it is asking too much of the mythmaker to make this distinction, or possibly it could be accounted for in the ambiguous depictions that have survived of Old Norse cosmology.<sup>185</sup> From *Vafþrúðnismál*, it is known that the world of the gods, Ásgarðr, and that of the giants, Jötunheim, are separated by the river 'Ifing'.<sup>186</sup> It is possible that Jötunheim actually surrounds Ásgarðr like a ring. For this cosmology

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<sup>183</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 68; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 63.

<sup>184</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Bellows, p. 111; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 63; *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 378.

<sup>185</sup> For an overview of Old Norse Cosmology see H.R. Ellis Davidson, 'Scandinavian Cosmology' in *Ancient Cosmologies*, eds. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 172-97. Davidson points out that Jötunheim seemed to be understood as being located specifically eastward from Ásgarðr, pp. 182-183.

<sup>186</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 46.

to make sense in a Müllerian interpretation it would require the world of Jötunheim to rotate around the world of Ásgarðr, a concept that is barely supported by Old Norse texts.<sup>187</sup>

The final problem with this interpretation is that it essentially reduces the main drama of the poem, the argument between Gerðr and Skírnir, to a single facet of the complex story the poet puts forth. Twenty-three of the forty-two total strophes concentrate on this argument, so the conflict is of unquestionable importance to the poet. But as stated previously, there are many other details that cannot be ignored as meaningless. It is far too simple a reduction of the rich detail provided by the poet to say it means nothing more than a *possible* sunset motif.

These problems notwithstanding, *Skírnismál* is certainly more amenable to the application of Müller's theories than *Alvíssmál* was. While this poem lacks the considerable list of natural phenomena terms provided by the poet in *Alvíssmál*, the characters of *Skírnismál*, their names, associations and interactions have provided enough evidence to create a plausible, if simplistic, interpretation of what the original 'Aryan' mythmaker might have been trying to describe. Attention must now turn to the final poem, in which character interactions are numerous and complicated.

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<sup>187</sup> Though poorly supported, this view, which is called the 'concentric model', has its modern advocates in Eleazar Meletinski, John Lindow and Kirsten Hastrup. For a discussion of this model's strengths and weaknesses, see Wanner, 'Off-Center', pp.37-51.

## **Lokasenna**

### *Narrative Details*

An examination of the poem *Lokasenna* will be the final attempt at applying the theories of Müller to Old Norse material. Unlike *Alvíssmál* or *Skírnismál*, this poem hosts a very large cast of characters: seventeen speaking roles in total. While there is not space for an etymological examination of all of the individual characters, it will be shown that several of them can be identified as belonging to natural phenomena groupings that are in opposition to the main character of the poem, Loki. The goal of the analysis of this poem is to explore Müller's methodology in explaining the meaning behind character interactions. Working with a much larger group of deities than has been done previously, there are far more interactions to explore. The possible hypotheses, of what gave rise to original 'Aryan' mythmaker's narrative, are likewise far more rich and interesting.

*Lokasenna* is the longest poem of this chapter's three selections. It is comprised of sixty-five strophes with both a prose introduction and epilogue, and it is only found in the Codex Regius. As with the other poems, dating the poem is difficult. It is thought, on the basis of its language and metre, that it could not have been composed any later than 1200 A.D.<sup>188</sup> The poem is similar to the previous two in that the narrative structure is a series of dialogues. As Skírnir was the main character in *Skírnismál*, so Loki is the main character in *Lokasenna*.

The narrative begins with a prose introduction where Ægir, who is also known as Gymir, is preparing an ale feast for the Æsir. Loki kills one of Ægir's servants, Fimafengr, and denied entry into the feast. The poem proper begins with

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<sup>188</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. by Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997), p. 30. For the possible merits and pitfalls of both a pre-Christian and Christian composition of *Lokasenna* see Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, pp. 228-229.



Loki forcing his way into Ægir's hall where he proceeds to systematically insult those in attendance. Eventually, Þórr arrives and drives Loki away. In the prose epilogue we are told that Loki is then captured by the Æsir and bound to a rock with a poisonous snake hanging above him. One simple interpretation for any natural phenomena contained in this poem, as mentioned earlier in the *Alvíssmál* section, is that it represents the mythic explanation for earthquakes amongst the Old Norse peoples (something only explained by the prose conclusion to the poem). However, Snorri also summarizes the events of *Lokasenna*, if sporadically, in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*. Therefore, his earthquake explanation of Loki's captivity would have been in existence, around the 1220s, prior to the compilation of the Codex Regius in the later part of that century.<sup>189</sup> This means that though the poetry of the narrative may be older, the prose could be inspired by Snorri's work.

### *Character Interpretation*

#### **Loki**

Loki, as the central character in this myth, represents the first interpretive challenge. This is not untrodden ground, the topic having been fiercely debated for many years, with a cornucopia of positions put forward. One particular idea that appealed to Victorian scholars was that Loki was meant to be a representation of fire. Though the merits of this argument will be explored, there is no intention to prove this theory correct. Rather it will be used to demonstrate that, in the eyes of a Müllerian interpreter, it offers the explanation that fits best within this universal schema.

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<sup>189</sup> As detailed in the introduction.

The standard interpretation was set by Jacob Grimm when he discussed the similarities between the Old Norse words 'Logi' and 'Loki' in his *Deutsche Mythologie*.<sup>190</sup> This connection is vital because 'logi' means 'fire'.<sup>191</sup> Grimm, however, was not the first to note the connection between the two words. In fact, the link was already apparent in the thirteenth century when Snorri wrote his *Gylfaginning*. In part of that narrative, Snorri describes the journey of Þórr and Loki to the castle of Útgarða-Loki where an eating contest took place between Loki and someone called 'Logi'. Though the two are able to eat the same amount of food, Logi eats through the table the food is sitting on as well. It is later revealed by the Útgarða-Loki character that Logi was a personification of fire and as such Loki could never have beaten him. Some scholars, such as E.J. Gras, suggest that this story is actually proof that Loki cannot have been a fire deity, because if he were, he too could have consumed the table: 'If Loki in popular tradition had been accepted as a fire-demon, he could not have played this role, because in this case he could not have been the losing party.'<sup>192</sup> However, a Müllerian interpreter might take a position similar to that of Jan de Vries: 'In truth, only such an irresponsible joker as this author must have been, could have hit upon the idea of telling about a contest between the fire-god and a fire-demon, in which the former was defeated.'<sup>193</sup> Though de Vries was actually a denouncer of the idea of Loki as a fire god, the suggestion here is that Snorri created a deliberate jest by having Loki, the fire god, be bested by a personification of the element to which he is associated.

A second argument on the grounds of etymological similarity was made about Loki and a character called 'Lóðurr'. This latter character appears in *Völuspá*,

<sup>190</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, pp. 220-225.

<sup>191</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 396.

<sup>192</sup> E.J. Gras, *De Noordse Loki-mythen in hun onderling verband*, p. 46 as cited in Jan de Vries, *The Problem of Loki* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Kirjapainon O.Y., 1933), pp.83-84.

<sup>193</sup> de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, p.84.

travelling together with Óðinn and Hœnir, and is said to have been the one who gave the gift of ‘lá’ when the trio happen upon the inert forms of mankind. The exact meaning of the term ‘lá’ has been debated,<sup>194</sup> but some translate it as ‘vital spark’ or ‘warmth’.<sup>195</sup> The connection of Lóðurr with Loki and fire has been made in several ways: first, Snorri substitutes Loki for Lóðurr at the beginning of his *Skáldskaparmál* when Óðinn and Hœnir once again set out on a journey;<sup>196</sup> secondly, Grimm made the connection between Lóðurr and fire more conclusive by suggesting the name meant ‘to blaze or glow’.<sup>197</sup> These connections have led some to suggest that the figure of Loki in the Eddas was a composite of several characters. Consider de Vries's argument (derived primarily from Axel Olrik): ‘In this way we may find an explanation for the mythical coherence by means of the circumstance that a divine thief of the fire (Lóðurr) in course of time coalesced with the thundergod’s servant (Loptr) and partly also with the early lightspirit of popular belief (Lokki)’.<sup>198</sup> In other words, the early Norse had several deities representing similar but different things, different Müllerian metaphors, which eventually came to be understood as a single entity.<sup>199</sup>

The reader does not have to accept that these theories are proven, for they have only been presented here in brief summary, but it should be clear that, if in forming a Müllerian interpretation of Loki one were to identify him with a fire-deity, one would not be sailing in uncharted waters. However, it should be noted that Müller himself never made a connection between Loki and fire. He lists two

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<sup>194</sup> *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, ed. by von See, I, p. 21.

<sup>195</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington. p. 6.

<sup>196</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p.59.

<sup>197</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, p. 200; Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. by James Steven Stallybrass, 4 vols (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Allen, 1880), I, p. 242.

<sup>198</sup> de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>199</sup> Further summary of the arguments made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be found in Frank Cawley, ‘The Figure of Loki in Germanic Mythology’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1939), pp. 311-316.

‘Aryan’ fire deities, 'Agni' and 'Bhuranyu', but never attempted to address the issue if either had an etymological link to 'loki', 'logi' or 'lóðurr'.<sup>200</sup>

Establishing the reasonableness of a view that Loki can be seen as a representation of fire is only the first step in the investigation. Not all of Loki's quarrels in *Lokasenna* are pertinent to this inquiry, so consideration will be limited to the best positive and negative examples as they relate to an application of Müller's theories.

### Njörðr, Ægir and Heimdallr

One good example of a veiled natural phenomena reference can be found inside the thirty-fourth strophe of the poem. Here, Loki berates the god Njörðr, and says:

Þegi þú, Njörðr,  
þú vart austr heðan  
gíls um sendr at goðom;  
Hymis meyar  
høfðo þik at hlandtrogi  
ok þér í munn migo.<sup>201</sup>

Be silent, Niord, from here you were  
sent east as hostage to the gods;  
the daughters of Hymir used you as a pisspot  
and pissed in your mouth.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, pp. 188, 190. The name Agni is found in Old Norse, both in the *Ynglingatal* poem and Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga* expansion of it, as the name of an early Swedish king. Some, such as Simek, hold that his apparent ritual murder suggest he was a sacrificial king similar to Dómaldr. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 4. For a summary of Agni and the academic debate surrounding this character, see David A. H. Evans, 'King Agni: Myth, History of Legend', *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, eds. Ursula Dronke, et. al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 89-105.

<sup>201</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 100.

<sup>202</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 90.

At first glance this strophe appears to be just an example of Loki's crude insults, but it could also serve as an explanation provided by the 'Aryan' mythmaker of how he thought his world functioned. The Niqrðr character, within this interpretive frame, is a personification of water, by virtue of his connections with the sea. It is known from *Grímnismál* that Niqrðr lives in a place called Nóatún,<sup>203</sup> which can be translated as 'the place of ships' or simply 'harbour'.<sup>204</sup> Snorri's *Gylfaginning* reinforces the nautical theme by saying that Niqrðr moderates the sea.<sup>205</sup>

The fact that that Niqrðr is connected with water is thus a fairly established idea, but what does this reveal about the *Lokasenna* strophe above? According to Dronke, it was common practice in a Nordic household to pass urine through a communal trough for collection so that later it could be used for cleansing and tanning leather. This is the first image the mythmaker could be employing. Second, Dronke argues that one can interpret Niqrðr's mouth as a representation of the sea. Hymir was a giant who lived in the vicinity of the Élivágar, icy primordial waves or rivers.<sup>206</sup> Thus, she feels that the image of Hymir's daughters urinating is actually a representation of the rivers flowing towards the sea.<sup>207</sup>

The passage above provides us with a description of natural phenomena that can serve as the starting point for a Müllerian analysis. But taken on its own, the thirty-fourth strophe does not address the overall scene that the mythmaker is trying to portray. The strophe must be examined within the context of the larger poem if we are to hypothesize that the mythmaker is trying to depict the struggle between the elements of fire and water. This is merely one of several elemental struggles that the mythmaker may have been trying to describe. The others are between fire and

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<sup>203</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 58.

<sup>204</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 163.

<sup>205</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 23.

<sup>206</sup> See strophe thirty one of *Vafþrúðnismál* for this river's role in the creation of the giants. *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.50.

<sup>207</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 364.

vegetation and between fire and a thunderstorm. We will turn our attention to the depictions of water first, since the conflict with Niðr is not the only example of Loki struggling with a water representation in *Lokasenna*.

There are at least two more examples to explore, both requiring substantial exposition. First let us consider the hostilities between Loki and Ægir that occur throughout the poem without ever coming to an actual battle between the two characters. Ægir is synonymous with Gymir from *Skírnismál*, whose ties to water have already been touched upon. The first instance of conflict comes even before the beginning of the poem, in the prose introduction: after Ægir has brewed his ale, Loki rashly kills Ægir's servant, Fimafengr, and is driven away from the hall. Throughout the poem, even though Ægir never speaks directly, there are frequent references to both his hall and his ale. In the last strophe of the poem, Loki finally launches his only verbal assault at Ægir saying:

Ol gørðir þú, Ægir;  
en þú aldri munt  
síðan sumbl um gøra;  
eiga þín ǫll,  
er hér inni er –  
leiki yfir logi,  
ok brenni þér á baki!<sup>208</sup>

Ale you brewed, Ægir, and you will never again  
hold a feast;  
all your possessions which are here inside --  
may flame play over them,  
and may your back be burnt!<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 106.

<sup>209</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 95.

Ægir, like Niqrðr, is a personification of the sea. It was shown in the above *Skírnismál* analysis that Snorri uses his name for descriptions of the sea in *Skáldskaparmál*, and that there may be a link in *Baldrs Draumar*, where the waves are said to be the ‘daughters of Ægir’.<sup>210</sup> Finally, there was some etymological similarity between ‘Ægir’ and the Latin word ‘æquor’ which also means ‘sea’. It is a plausible extension of the sea-god’s physical essence to view him as the agent responsible for brewing the liquid ale upon which the narrative of *Lokasenna* revolves.<sup>211</sup> Loki’s clash with him in the above strophe also serves to reinforce Loki’s fire characteristics, as the mythmaker chooses to employ the same ironic word play on ‘logi’/‘loki’ that was found in the Útgarda-Loki section of Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* by suggesting that Ægir’s hall would be consumed by ‘logi’ or flame. The difference in the two presentations is that here in *Lokasenna*, the mythmaker is not making a pun of the names for comical effect but rather emphasizing the opposing elements that Loki and Ægir represent.<sup>212</sup>

Next, consider the clash between Loki and Heimdallr:

*Heimdallr kvað:*  
 Qlr ertu, Loki,  
 svá at þú er ørviti,  
 hví né letskaðu, Loki?  
 Þvíat ofdrykkia  
 veldr alda hveim,  
 er sína mælgí né manat.

<sup>210</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 91. See page 61.

<sup>211</sup> It is of note that Müller does not provide any examples of ‘Aryan’ representations for the sea. The closest water representation is ‘Varsha’ or ‘rain’. Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 197.

<sup>212</sup> Some commentators, such as de Vries, agree that the mythmaker is trying to show that Ægir’s hall, that of the sea-god, can only be destroyed by fire, but they do not agree that this necessarily means Loki is any sort of fire deity. Loki may merely have realized that fire was the only way to destroy the sea-god’s hall and therefore imposed the threat he did. de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, p.207.

*Loki kvað:*

Þegi, þú, Heimdallr!

þér var í árdaga

it lióta líf um lagit;

aurgo baki

þú munt æ vera

ok vaka vǫrðr goða.<sup>213</sup>

Drunk you are, Loki, so that you're out of your wits,

why don't you stop speaking?

For too much drinking makes every man

not keep his talkativeness in check.

Be silent, Heimdall, for you in bygone days

a hateful life was decreed:

a muddy back you must always have

and watch as guard of the gods.<sup>214</sup>

The liquid ale is another representation of water that Loki must struggle with, represented several times in the poem by comments about his sobriety. The comment cited here coming from Heimdallr is particularly significant. Not only does it identify the issue of Loki's drunkenness, which is a weakness in regards to ale resulting in a loss of sensibility, but the fact that identification of this vulnerability originates with Heimdallr is also of interest. The god Heimdallr is important in this analysis both in terms of his observations as well as his lineage.

The so-called *Shorter Völuspá*, contained within the *Hyndluljóð*, says this of Heimdallr:

Varð einn borinn

í árdaga,

rammaukinn miðk,

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<sup>213</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 102.

<sup>214</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 92.



ragna kindar;  
nío báro þann,  
naddgøfgan mann,  
iøtna meýiar  
við iarðar þrom.

Hann Giálp um bar,  
hann Greip um bar,  
bar hann Eistla  
ok Eyrgiafa  
hann bar Úlfrún  
ok Angeyia,  
Imðr ok Atla  
ok Iárnsaxa.

Sá var aukinn  
iarðar megni,  
svalkøldom sæ  
ok sonardreyra.<sup>215</sup>

One was born in bygone days,  
with enormous power of the sons of men;  
then nine women gave birth to him, to the  
spear-magnificent man,  
daughters of giants, at the edge of the earth.

Gialp bore him, Greip bore him,  
Eistla bore him and Eyrgiafa;  
Ulfrun and Angeyia,  
Imd and Atla and Iarnsaxa.

He was empowered with the strength of earth,  
the cool waves of the sea, and sacrificial blood.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 290.

<sup>216</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 258.

Based on this testimony, especially in light of strophe 38 of the *Lokasenna*, Müller could certainly have concluded that the mythmaker of the *Hyndluljóð* saw the Heimdallr character as a combination of the elements of water, symbolized by both the sea and the blood, and earth. The idea of a water representation is further bolstered by Grimm's assertion that Heimdallr's name has etymological links to Germanic words for rivers.<sup>217</sup>

An alternative, but still Müllerian, conclusion could be drawn from an examination of the name 'Imðr', who was one of Heimdallr's mothers. If, as Bellows does, one translates her name to mean 'dusk', then there is potential evidence to connect Heimdallr with sunset.<sup>218</sup> Dusk is the vague time period right after sunset when there is still some faint light, twilight, before night sets in. Perhaps the battles between Heimdallr and Loki could be seen as the natural phenomena of sunset, assuming that Heimdallr has inherited some of his mother's characteristics of twilight. The mythmaker could interpret the battle as the sun/fire deity (Loki) struggling against the darkness (Heimdallr, since darkness naturally follows dusk). Extending the analysis further, it could be surmised that Heimdallr is always the victor due to his connections with dusk.

Evidence of quarrels between Loki and Heimdallr are not limited to the *Lokasenna* alone. Consider the difficult passage of the *Húsdrápa* that Snorri quotes in the *Skáldskaparmál*:

Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna  
rein at Singasteini  
frægr við firnaslægjan  
Fárbauta mög vári;

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<sup>217</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 3 vols (Gütersloh: Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1835), I, p.193.

<sup>218</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Bellows, p.229.

móðöflugr ræðr mæðra  
mögr hafnýra fögru,  
kynni ek, ok einnar  
átta, mæðar þáttum.<sup>219</sup>

Renowned defender [Heimdall] of powers' way [Bifrost], kind of counsel, competes with Farbauti's terribly sly son at Singastein. Son of eight mothers plus one, mighty of mood, is first to get hold of the beautiful sea-kidney [jewel, Brisingamen]. I announce it in strands of praise.<sup>220</sup>

This quote follows a description of Heimdallr where Snorri says:

Hann er ok tilsækir Vágaskers ok Singasteins. Þá deildi hann við Loka um Brisingamen. Hann heitir ok Vindlér. Úlfr Uggason kvað í Húsdrápu langa stund eftir þeirri frásögu, ok er þess þar getit, at þeir vǫru í selalíkjum.<sup>221</sup>

He is also the visitor to Vagasker and Singastein; on that occasion he contended with Loki for the Brisingamen. He is also known as Vindhler. Ulf Uggason composed a long passage in Husdrapa based on this story, and it is mentioned there that they were in the form of seals.<sup>222</sup>

The battle between Loki and Heimdallr over the Brisingamen or 'sea-kidney' is no doubt of importance, but it is also very difficult to interpret because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence. Snorri's above statement that Heimdallr is in the form of a seal when he wins the gem reinforces a perception of his connections with water since the seal is certainly an aquatic animal. But the seal is an animal, not a fish, so he serves the additional function of joining land and sea, earth and water. If Loki's fight with Heimdallr is another sunset representation of the fiery sun (Loki)

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<sup>219</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 20.

<sup>220</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 77.

<sup>221</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 19.

<sup>222</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 76.

meeting the horizon (Heimdallr) where the sun is consumed, then the seal's ability to live on both land and in the sea extends the sunset imagery: it works whether the horizon is earth or ocean. Earlier in the *Skírnismál* discussion, it was shown that Müller himself acknowledged the Nordic sunset imagery when he referenced the Slavonic concept of the sun bathing in the evening.<sup>223</sup>

Clearly there are a host of water representations in *Lokasenna*. Some readers may have trouble with multiple characters representing the same element or elements, but keep in mind that Müller freely admitted that multiple poets were in all likelihood responsible for the descriptions of the gods that filtered down through time.<sup>224</sup> Therefore, there is no problem if the mythmaker of *Lokasenna* identified Heimdallr, Niqrðr and Ægir all as water representations. It is also certainly possible that these characters are meant to represent specific variations on the water theme, different types or embodiments of distinct characteristics of water. Finally, it must be noted that the water characteristics of Ægir and Niqrðr are contained within the poem, but the mythmaker of *Lokasenna* relies on knowledge concerning the characteristics of Heimdallr that are from outside sources since discussion of these characteristics are not provided within the poem. There is no way of avoiding the conclusion that this casts some doubt on any interpretation concerning Heimdallr.

### **Iðunn, Freyr and Byggvir**

Having addressed parts of the poem that might relate to fire and water, the next task is to examine how the mythmaker characterized Loki's clash with vegetation or the concept of fertility. This takes on three forms inside the *Lokasenna*. First is Iðunn whose encounter with Loki goes:

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<sup>223</sup> See page 62; and Müller, 'Comparative Mythology', p. 79.

<sup>224</sup> See pages 22, 24-25.

*Idunn kvað:*

Bið ec þik, Bragi,  
barna sífiar duga  
ok allra óskmaga,  
at þú Loka  
kveðira lastastofom  
Ægis hóllo í!

*Loki kvað::*

Þegi þú, Idunn,  
þik kveð ek allra kvenna  
vergiarnasta vera,  
sítztu arma þína  
lagðir ítrþvegna  
um þinn bróðurbana!

*Idunn kvað:*

Loka ek kveðka  
lastastofom  
Ægis hóllo í;  
Braga ek kyrr, biórreifan,  
vilkat ek at iþ vreiðir vegiz.<sup>225</sup>

*Idunn said:*

I ask you, Bragi, to do a service to your blood-kin  
and all the adoptive relations,  
that you shouldn't say words of blame to Loki  
in Ægir's hall.

*Loki said:*

Be silent, Idunn, I declare that of all women  
you're the most man-crazed,  
since you placed your arms, washed bright,

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<sup>225</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 96-97.

about your brother's slayer.

*Idunn said:*

I'm not saying words of blame to Loki  
in Ægir's hall;  
I quietened Bragi, made talkative with beer;  
I don't want you two angry men to fight.<sup>226</sup>

The fertility image here is Iðunn's desire for peace between Bragi and Loki. As Dronke notes, 'Iðunn's instinct for peace and the children's future is in keeping with her nature as goddess of renewal and prosperity.'<sup>227</sup> It would be somewhat strange if Iðunn, the wife of Bragi, were to goad him into fighting<sup>228</sup>; what is more telling about the nature of this goddess is that she also refuses to provoke Loki. In other words she tries to protect life regardless of its source.

In Norse mythology, Iðunn is best known for her magical apples, the story which is related by Snorri at the beginning of the *Skáldskaparmál* and which he bolsters by quoting the *Haustlǫng* composed by Þjóðólfr of Hvin.<sup>229</sup> Briefly summarized, Loki is captured by the giant Þjazi, and in order to secure his release, he has to promise to lure Iðunn and her apples away to be captured by the giant. He does so, but without the presence of Iðunn the gods begin to wither away. Loki then rescues Iðunn by turning her into a nut and himself into a falcon and flying her back to the gods. Upon her return, the gods' vitality is restored. The narrative can be interpreted as a fire vs. fertility story, but for the purposes of this *Lokasenna*

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<sup>226</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 88.

<sup>227</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 358.

<sup>228</sup> However, the occurrence of wives persuading their husbands (the 'nag' as Christiansen describes it) to fight is not unknown in Old Norse literature. Hallgerðr from *Brennu-Njáls saga* blatantly goads her husband Gunnar into fighting, eventually leading to his death. For an overview on womens' relation to power, see Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), pp.17-24.

<sup>229</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, pp. 30-33.

analysis, the important feature is the identification of Iðunn as a fertility deity, and establishing a relationship between her character and that of Loki.

The fertility imagery surrounding Iðunn in *Skáldskaparmál* comes in three forms. First, there is the change in the Æsir's appearance during her absence. 'En æsir urðu illa við hvarf Iðunnar, ok gerðust þeir brátt hárir ok gamlir.'<sup>230</sup> / But the Æsir were badly affected by Idunn's disappearance and soon became grey and old.'<sup>231</sup> The second image involves the apples themselves.<sup>232</sup> The giant specifically requests 'koma Iðunni út of Ásgarð með epli sín' or 'Idunn to come outside Asgard with her apples'.<sup>233</sup> Müller believed that the golden apples in other narratives from 'Aryan'-descended cultures, without specific reference to the Old Norse system, were meant to represent the daily sun and its life giving properties.<sup>234</sup> But according to Turville-Petre, there is some doubt as to whether the Old Norse 'epli' actually meant 'apples', as the fruit was not known in Scandinavia until the late Middle Ages, and he suggests that the term could rather be a reference to acorns.<sup>235</sup> This reading of the story ties in nicely with Iðunn's third fertility image: the nut that she was transformed into by Loki. The nut, or seed pod, is perhaps the quintessential symbol of vegetation fertility; it is a representation of the reproduction process waiting to begin.

The second important clash in the *Lokasenna*, which can be read as one involving fertility, comes between Freyr and his servant Byggvir. As was the case with Iðunn, there is substantial evidence that Freyr is a representation of fertility as our previous analysis of *Skírnismál* has shown. Perhaps an even more interesting

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<sup>230</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 2.

<sup>231</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 60; *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 1.

<sup>232</sup> For an examination of these apples, see Sophus Bugge, 'Iduns æbler: Et bidrag til de nordiske mythers historie', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 5 (1889), pp. 1-45.

<sup>233</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 1.

<sup>234</sup> Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, pp. 93-97.

<sup>235</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p.186.

characteristic of Freyr is revealed, though, in the *Lokasenna* when Freyr's servant, Byggvir, comes to his defence against Loki's insults. Because this exchange yields additional information to what is already known about the exchanges between Loki and Freyr, it is worth attention.

Why is the Byggvir reference of such interest? It is all in the name: in Old Norse the word 'bygg' means 'barley',<sup>236</sup> a perfect Müllerian example of an etymological link to natural phenomena. Other than Loki and Ægir, the other Old Norse names in *Lokasenna* analyzed so far have been semantically barren or corrupted, forcing a reliance on examinations of the deeds attributed to them in order to establish a link to natural phenomena. But in Byggvir there finally is an example of a character whose name has clearly retained its etymological significance as an indicator of an important characteristic. Consider:

*Loki qvað:*

Þegi þú, Byggvir!

þú kunnir aldregi

deila með mönnum mat;

oc þik í flets strá

finna né máttu,

þá er vógo verar.<sup>237</sup>

*Loki said:*

Be silent, Byggvir, you never know how to

share out food among men;

and in the straw on the dais you make sure you can't be

found when men are going to fight.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>237</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 102.

<sup>238</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 92.



Putting aside for the moment the question of why the mythmaker specifically included a dispute between a servant and Loki, the idea that *Lokasenna* contains Müllerian representations of fertility or vegetation in the characters of Iðunn, Freyr and Byggvir seems more than plausible, it seems obvious. These characterizations lose some credibility as possible ‘Aryan’ decedents, since Müller never drew any parallels to Iðunn, Freyr or Byggvir in the considerable lists of ‘Aryan’ agricultural terms detailed in his scholarship.<sup>239</sup> Even so, it is difficult to dismiss the developing trend of Loki positioned in these narratives in opposition to natural forces.

### **Þórr**

In *Lokasenna*, the final struggle for the fire-deity Loki is between himself and Þórr. In fact, Þórr is the only figure able to silence (in effect, to stop) Loki and drive him from Ægir’s hall. There must be a reason why he is able to do this.<sup>240</sup> As mentioned previously, Þórr is also one of the few Old Norse deities upon which Müller actually commented in his mythological writings, even if those comments are largely in the form of quotations from the scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt.<sup>241</sup>

First it is necessary to establish what Þórr is meant to represent in *Lokasenna*. Earlier in *Alvíssmál* it was shown that Þórr has strong links to the earth, but the important evidence for consideration in the context of this analysis is found in his given name. ‘Þórr’ is etymologically related to the Anglo-Saxon ‘Þunor’, the Old High German ‘donar’, and, of course, the English ‘thunder’.<sup>242</sup> Müller himself believed that the early ‘Aryans’ had a god called ‘Tan’ who was the embodiment of

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<sup>239</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, pp. 174-77.

<sup>240</sup> Though it does not figure in this interpretation, Axel Olrik argued that Loki was the evolution of a character that in earlier, lost, narratives was the thunder-god’s companion. Therefore as a possible subordinate, Loki would be subject to Þórr’s commands. Axel Olrik, ‘Tordenguden og hans dreng’, *Danske studier*, 2 (1905), pp.129-146.

<sup>241</sup> Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, p. 744.

<sup>242</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 742.

thunder. He saw the Sanskrit 'tanyatú' and the Old Norse 'Thôrr' as descendents of this god and evidence for Tan's prior existence.<sup>243</sup> Adding weight to the evidence of the name Þórr bears is the name of the hammer he carries, 'Miðllnir',<sup>244</sup> though the exact etymology of the term is not certain. Some compare the name Miðllnir to the Icelandic verbs 'mala' and 'mölva' meaning 'to grind' and 'to crush'.<sup>245</sup> Other scholars compare it to the Russian words 'mólnija' and the Welsh 'mellt', both of which mean 'lightning'.<sup>246</sup> These latter references are important if the god himself is considered to be the representation of thunder. Logically, lightning should accompany him, and not only lightning but also perhaps more significantly, rain. Müller himself argued that Germanic thunder gods, and therefore also the gods of the Norse, could be associated with all the facets of a storm, most particularly rain.<sup>247</sup>

Müller identified two 'Aryan' deities which he felt represented either rain or rain storms. One, mentioned earlier, was 'Varsha' who appears to have no link to Þórr.<sup>248</sup> The other was 'Parganya', whose name Müller believed eventually shifted into the Teutonic term 'fairguni' or 'mountain'.<sup>249</sup> Also in the *Alvíssmál* analysis, Grimm argued for a tendency among the Teutonic people to associate their thunder gods with the mountains.<sup>250</sup> Similarly, Müller asserted that when the Germanic 'Thunar' is said to 'milk his heavenly cows and derives strength from their milk', this is actually a reference to the thunder god forcing the clouds, or cows, to release their nourishing rain, or milk.<sup>251</sup> Therefore, it is entirely within Müller's interpretive

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<sup>243</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 196.

<sup>244</sup> Müller himself confuses the issue by suggesting that Miðllnir specifically is an 'Aryan' survival term for some sort of boomerang weapon. Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, II, p. 750.

<sup>245</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Dronke, II, p. 370.

<sup>246</sup> Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 81.

<sup>247</sup> Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, II, p. 749.

<sup>248</sup> Müller, *Biographies of Words*, p. 197.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>250</sup> See page 37.

<sup>251</sup> Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, I, p. 93.

schema to extend the association of Þórr's thundering personality to include aspects of the rain that so often accompany thunder.<sup>252</sup>

### *General 'Aryan' Interpretation of Lokasenna*

It is readily apparent from the selection of *Lokasenna* characters we have examined that many of them have potential ties to natural phenomena. Some phenomena, like fire, have had only a single representative, such as Loki. Others, like water and fertility, have had multiple representatives. The general argument could therefore be made that the poem is primarily a Norse descendant of an 'Aryan' mythmaker's observation of fire interacting with other natural elements. However, as was seen in the interpretation of Prokris and Kephalos,<sup>253</sup> Müller's goal in interpreting a myth was to explain the entire frame of the narrative. This larger interpretation of *Lokasenna* will appear quite similar to that of Prokris presented above because it will require the same sort of logical leap of faith as that of Müller's Prokris interpretation.

The argument would be that the mythmaker was trying to depict the effects of a massive fire, a fire that had interactions with water, vegetation and then finally a terminal thunderstorm. It can be extrapolated that the narrative is the result of the mythmaker's attendance at a social gathering, a gathering that involves the drinking of ale and is interrupted by a fire. We have seen that the poem contains representations of agriculture and fertility, and the importance of crops in the lives of the early 'Aryan' peoples cannot be overstated. Müller himself devoted an entire

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<sup>252</sup> Sir George Cox, an Oxford scholar inspired by Müller, believed that Óðinn was related to the Anglo-Saxon water god Nicor, and therefore the Old Norse rain representation. George Cox, *Mythology of the Aryan Nations* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878), pp. 376-77. Interestingly, Müller tried to dissuade Cox from pursuing comparative mythology saying: 'I believe you can do far more real and important work in other fields of research.' *Life and Letters*, ed. by Adelaide, p. 364.

<sup>253</sup> See page 18.

section of his *Biographies of Words* to the reconstructed 'Aryan' terms for agriculture. For an agricultural community, what could be more devastating than a crop fire? Loki's quarrel with Byggvir, the barley representation, is therefore a vital clue. Loki's attack prompts one to visualize the mythmaker viewing a blazing plains fire (Loki) that erupts in a field of barley (Byggvir) during a social gathering. Some validation of this idea can be found in Grimm's striking parallel story of Loki and plains fires which he noted in *Deutsche Mythologie*:

Thorlacius hat gewiesen, dafs in der redensart 'Loki fer yfir akra' (L. fährt über die äcker), in der dänischen: 'Locke dricker vand' (L. trinkt wasser) feuer und brennende sonne gemeint werde, wir sagen in gleicher meinung: die sonne zieht wasser, wenn sie in hellem streifen zwischen zwei wolken durscheint.<sup>254</sup>

Thorlacius has proved that in the phrase 'Loki fer yfir akra' (passes over the fields) and in the Danish 'Locke dricker vand' (drinks water), fire and the burning sun are meant, just as we say the sun is drawing water, when he shines through in bright streaks between two clouds.<sup>255</sup>

Thorlacius, a writer Grimm is vague about, thus has provided a strong etymological link between 'Loki' and plains fires. In *Lokasenna*, Iðunn and Freyr do not have the direct etymological link that Byggvir does to vegetation, but their presence can easily be interpreted as reinforcing the struggle between fire and the nourishment of the mythmaker's community. Perhaps Freyr, the predominant symbol for fertility in Old Norse culture, being subjected to an attack by the fire deity is the mythmaker's way of expressing his fear that the harvest, which is the means of sustenance of the community, is imperilled.

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<sup>254</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, p. 221.

<sup>255</sup> *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. by Stallybrass, I, p. 242.

When fire erupts, the initial reaction would be to try to extinguish it as quickly as possible with whatever source is at hand. The obvious choice for the narrative's party-goers is the liquid ale they have in their hands, which the mythmaker represented with the characters of Ægir and Heimdallr. Heimdallr points out Loki's weakness in regards to ale, in his references to Loki's drunkenness, but the ale is not sufficient to extinguish the fire (drunkenness does not overcome Loki). Perhaps the desperate solution of resorting to the liquids of their own bodies, urinating on the flames, was also tried; something suggested by Loki's attack on the water representation Niqrðr. Perhaps Heimdallr's involvement in the story, as the representation of earth, could suggest that the partygoers also tried snuffing out the fire with dirt. Ultimately, the mythmaker tells his listeners that Loki silenced all of his assailants, thus the argument would be that none of the tactics employed succeeded in extinguishing the fire. When Þórr finally appears in the poem, and subsequently drives Loki away from the gathering, the mythmaker's message can be read as a message that only Þórr, the personification of storms and rain, is capable of saving the fields, the social gathering, and by extension the community.

### *Difficulties & Conclusions for Lokasenna*

There are several weaknesses in this potential Müllerian interpretation of *Lokasenna*. The first is contained in the basic premise that Loki is the god of fire. While it is probably safe to assume that, since Müller's contemporary Jacob Grimm made the connection between Loki and fire, Müller himself would have no problem adopting this view; however, more recent scholars have not always been so sure this is the case. A comprehensive rebuke of the Loki/fire theory was made in 1933 by

Jan de Vries. As noted earlier in the analysis, De Vries laid out the arguments in favour of the interpretation and then systematically picked them apart.<sup>256</sup>

Misinterpretation of almost all the other *Lokasenna* characters (aside from Loki) could be explained away as historical corruptions, even character representations as important as Þórr. For instance, if Þórr is seen as a representation of earth rather than lightning, putting more weight on his descent from mother "Iqrð" as seen in *Alvíssmál*, then the overall interpretation would still be valid, it would simply mean that earth or soil play the important role of extinguishing fire and exerting dominance over the fire-deity. But nothing holds together if Loki is not seen as a fire-deity. Without that identification, there is no plausible Müllerian interpretation: it all falls apart.

Deliberately choosing, or being forced, to disregard aspects of the poem is always a potential problem in attempting a Müllerian interpretation. The presentation of only a portion of the poem as a subject for analysis was not merely due to the space constraints of this study; it is important to remember that certain aspects of the poem *could not be* analyzed in a Müllerian schema, even if space permitted. As with *Skírnismál*, some of these are vital parts of the poem. Consider what Loki says in the ninth strophe of *Lokasenna*:

Mantu þat, Óðinn,  
er vit í árdaga  
blendom blóði saman ;  
qlvi bergia  
létstu eigi mundo,  
nema okkr væri báðom borit.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, pp. 151-162.

<sup>257</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 95.

Do you remember, Odin, when in bygone days  
we mixed our blood together?  
You said you would never drink ale  
unless it were brought to both of us.<sup>258</sup>

This strophe is a vivid expression of the blood brotherhood that exists between Loki and Odin, making it impossible to deny that an earlier, close connection existed between Loki and the god Óðinn. What possible explanation of this relationship, in terms of natural phenomena, could a Müllerian offer? If, as in *Alvissmál*, Óðinn is seen as a representation of death, the mythmaker might then be depicting the connection between fire and death or destruction. However, if this is the point, why are the two at odds in *Lokasenna*? One interpretation would be that Loki is instead meant to represent the beneficial aspects of fire and is therefore at odds with death, yet this contradicts the interpretation of the destructive Loki that everything else has pointed toward so far. Looking at the larger poem, and this passage in particular, one is left to conclude that either the mythmaker of *Lokasenna* was somehow confused about the character of Loki, or that there were multiple mythmakers, or that the poem has been corrupted by historical forces. None of these conclusions offer any empirical evidence to support a Müllerian thesis.

Finally, it must be conceded that the ‘crop fire at a social gathering’ frame for the poem raises concerns. It is undeniable that any interpretation whose goal is to recreate a belief system of a pre-historic culture will require a lot of conjecture on the part of the reader. This is the case for many of Müller’s interpretations. However, the lengths to which the evidence has to be stretched in order to create a Müllerian argument for *Lokasenna*’s meaning are extreme. More important for this study than the actual interpretation put forth above, is the awareness of all the

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<sup>258</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.86.

intellectual pitfalls that are inherent in the application of Müller's approach to myths, from focused analysis of a particular god's name, to combining as many aspects of the story as possible, to forming a larger, natural phenomena basis for all the action portrayed.

Despite these considerable difficulties, this Müllerian examination of *Lokasenna* has provided some important insights. It was possible to explain some of the content of the poem (its clash between fire and vegetation), as well as its general frame (the outbreak of a crop fire and the 'Aryan' attempt to contain it). However, is this enough to make Müller's etymological interpretive theory as a whole credible? Clearly, it is not.

## **Conclusions on Müller's Etymological Method**

How useful is Müller's etymological approach to linking myth with natural phenomena when applied to Old Norse narratives? The text of *Alvíssmál* provides a wealth of Old Norse terms for natural phenomena. However, terms for things are not as important in a Müllerian understanding of myths as are the names of active characters. This chapter began with the hope that the terms found in *Alvíssmál* would appear as names often in our investigations into Old Norse characters, but (unfortunately) that has not proved to be the case. It has been possible to identify only a handful of occasions where the names of our three poems' cast of characters were of significance. Even the characters themselves, particularly in *Alvíssmál*, have been somewhat disappointing. While Þórr has demonstrably strong 'Aryan' connections, assisted by what is revealed in his appearance in *Lokasenna*, *Alvíss* provided no useful information in establishing a link to any natural phenomena. The



other glaring issue with *Alvíssmál* was the inability to form any solid interpretation for the original ‘Aryan’ mythmaker’s impetus in crafting the poem.

*Skírnismál* proved to be much more conducive to analysis within Müller's system of interpretation. The two principal characters have fairly clear etymological links to the sun and the earth, and the overall idea of one fertilizing the other is not a difficult conclusion to accept. There are some concerns over the omissions of seemingly vital imagery, such as the magical sword and taming wand, and the marginal importance placed on the lengthy confrontation between Skírnir and Gerðr is troublesome. However, none of these qualifications appear devastating enough to compromise the validity of the overall interpretation of the poem proposed as in keeping with Müller’s theories regarding myths.

It is in the consideration of the final poem, *Lokasenna*, however, that all that was hinted at in the previous two poems becomes much more apparent. With its considerably larger cast of characters, an explanation of the overall ‘Aryan’ inspiration has to be considerably more complex. Even amidst this complexity, however, the entire interpretation still hinges on one simple factor: the acceptance of Loki as a fire representation. This idea would have been far more likely to go unchallenged in Müller's era, but since then considerable doubt has been raised as to its legitimacy. Also, even though it was possible to include a good number of *Lokasenna* characters in our interpretative analysis, there are significant omissions, most notably the figure of Óðinn. Finally, the interpretation requires considerably more faith in un-provable hypotheses concerning the mythmaker’s original intention for the narrative than most contemporary scholars are willing to allow. Taken together, this means that even the poem *Lokasenna* fails to provide a strong example supporting Müller’s theoretical approach.

Overall, these three poems had clear etymological potential, but it is also clear that Müller's theories cannot single-handedly explain the origin or content of their mythological significance. The difficulties became apparent when his theories were forced to explain the origin of the narrative. Surmising the hypothetical intentions of a theoretical mythmaker opened the door to a host of problems. The Old Norse characters explored here were something of a mixed bag in terms of the strength of their 'Aryan' and natural phenomena links, and therefore are likely a good cross section of the Old Norse pantheon in general. Some, such as Gerðr and Þórr, had clear links to 'Aryan' deities. Others, like Skírnir, revealed links within Old Norse etymologies, but some important characters, like Freyr, had no etymological links of significance and their natural phenomena connections could only be deduced through attributed actions in other narratives. In summation, while Müller's theories have some Old Norse etymological ground to stand on, there are enough problems to deem that ground shaky at best. It is therefore not surprising that the scholars who came after Müller did not follow him and instead looked for answers beyond etymological analysis.

## Chapter Two:

### Survivals & Totemism

In this second chapter we will explore the anthropological method of myth interpretation that became popular during the mid to late nineteenth century. Müller was certainly aware of this approach and during his lifetime he fought strenuously against it and the men who developed it. Unlike the previous chapter, which focused on a single scholar, this chapter examines the approaches of two scholars: Edward B. Tylor and Andrew Lang. These two have been chosen to introduce the anthropological method for several reasons. Tylor was the first to introduce the concept of ‘survivals’, a theoretical tool for glimpsing traces of a culture’s past that many of the scholars who followed him would utilize. He also was one of the early scholars who argued that, like individual organisms, societies and cultures also went through evolutionary changes as time passed. Lang, though he may be historically better remembered for his work with fairy tales, is initially of interest because his theories of mythology were established in deliberate opposition to those of Müller.<sup>259</sup> The theories themselves were built on Tylor’s survival concept and try to explain magic and the development of religious worship in early societies. By applying these theories to *Poetic Edda* source material, Lang’s work will offer insight into early Nordic culture that does not require suppositions regarding the mental state of a poem’s original maker.

The scholarly field of anthropology was still very much in its early developmental stages during the nineteenth century. At that time, the field was dominated by what is now called the theory of ‘unilinear evolution’, something

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<sup>259</sup> See George Stocking Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 53-56.

Tylor was instrumental in developing. This theory held that every society underwent certain stages of evolution. It allowed for the progression of different societies through various stages at different rates but posited that the stages themselves were the same for every society. One of the more popular expositions of this theory came from John Lubbock. Writing in 1870, a year prior to the publication of Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Lubbock argued that all societies progressed from atheism, the absence of belief in a deity; to fetishism, a belief that humans can control their deity through material objects; to totemism, where animals or plants are deified and turned into symbols of society; to shamanism, when deities become remote and can only be accessed through a priestly/shaman caste; to idolatry, where gods act like men; and then finally, to theism, or the belief in a single god.<sup>260</sup>

As anthropological scholarship advanced, the unilinear theories of cultural evolution were found to be untenable. Initially they were replaced by 'universal' evolutionary theories that simply broadened and generalized the stages that societies went through. Instead of the six specific stages identified by Lubbock, the three general stages 'savagery', 'barbarism' and 'civilization' of Lewis Henry Morgan gained acceptance. The universal theories were in turn replaced by 'multilinear' theories which suggested that although all societies evolved, they did so due to different circumstances, often technological and ecological, and at different rates.<sup>261</sup>

In this chapter, due to Tylor's development of it and then Lang's use of it, examinations will be constrained to the unilinear theory, and within that, the

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<sup>260</sup> Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 36. For Lubbock's original argument and an explanation of how it existed in different generations, see John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man* (New York: D.Appleton and Co., 1895), pp. 209-212.

<sup>261</sup> For an example of Morgan's development model, see Lewis Henry Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity & Affinity of the Human Family* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 480; and for an outline of his specific stages and their subsections, see Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1877), pp. 9-10.

totemism stage since neither scholar worked with the later theories. Using this approach, we will attempt to understand the evolution of Old Norse society as glimpsed through its mythological narratives. However, a little back story concerning totemism is needed to understand the way it was being used by Victorian scholars. The term ‘totemism’ itself is derived from a concept of the Ojibwa people of North America. ‘Totem’ was introduced into the English language in 1791 by British merchants but the first academic description of totemic ideas did not occur until 1856 in the work of Peter Hones. The contemporary scholar Alan Barnard summarizes Hones’ basic idea that the Ojibwa totem ‘is represented by an animal species, and it symbolizes a patrilineal clan [...] and there is a rule that a person cannot marry one who shares his or her totem’.<sup>262</sup> Scholars such as Lubbock took this concept and posited from it the idea that natural objects were used to symbolize social characteristics, customs or practices. According to the principles of unilinear development, all societies would have passed through a stage of using objects in this way, European societies included. Victorian scholars believed that it was still possible to find societies in the stage of totemism in North and South America, Australia, Asia, Africa and the Pacific.<sup>263</sup> But for societies that had long since passed through the totemic stage, the Victorians needed a method to find historical remnants of their history. This is where Tylor’s theories entered into the discussion.

Even with a theory to work from, finding scattered traces of ancient societies often required extensive analysis of a broad range of ancient texts, as will be seen in the scholarship of both Tylor and Lang. Therefore, while our focus will continue to be on the *Poetic Edda* poems, in this chapter, as distinct from the approach taken

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<sup>262</sup> Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*, p. 34. Barnard is actually referencing Hones from a degree of separation as he does not cite Hones directly, but rather Lévi-Strauss’ explanation of him. For the complete discussion of the difficulty in defining totemism, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. by Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 1-14.

<sup>263</sup> Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*, p. 33.

with Müller, it will be beneficial to include consideration of additional references from outside the *Poetic Edda*. The most significant will be material drawn from Snorri's *Prose Edda*, but reference will be made to some saga literature as well.<sup>264</sup> Also unlike the previous chapter where three very different poems from the *Poetic Edda* were independently examined, this chapter will focus on only two poems, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Völuspá*. Both of these poems contain a wealth of mythological allusions and will serve as a springboard for examining other mythological texts and concepts within the Old Norse corpus as well as a medium for explaining the theories of Tylor and Lang within the larger framework of Old Norse literature.

It must also be noted that while we are still employing 'comparative' approaches to the study of myth, the examination of Tylor and Lang dramatically expands the cultures eligible for study. Neither of them believed that when studying a European society one was necessarily constrained to comparing it only with other European societies, Indo or otherwise. As Barnard states, in their minds, 'the prime example of "primal culture" had moved from Sir Henry Maine's Romans to the Aborigines'.<sup>265</sup> There is ample evidence to show that both scholars freely drew parallels between ancient European cultures and 19<sup>th</sup> century observations of native North American tribes. In fact, it was exposure to these tribes that sparked the anthropological interests of this chapter's first scholar.

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<sup>264</sup> We shall also see that our two scholars in this chapter are more familiar with Scandinavian material and as such, we will not need to make as many of the drastic leaps of academic faith that were necessary in the previous chapter. However, as the primacy of Greek and Indian myth in their respective works is still very much the norm, our extension of their use of the Norse material is certainly warranted.

<sup>265</sup> Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*, p. 35.

## **Edward B. Tylor (Oct. 1832 – Feb. 1917)**

### *Tylor's Life & Works*

Tylor was born into London's socio-economic upper classes, but as a Quaker, he was not eligible for admittance as a degree seeking candidate at either Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>266</sup> His education was instead obtained at Grove House School, a Quaker boarding school in Tottenham. Then, in his mid-twenties, he developed tuberculosis and travelled to Central America. In the same year (1856) that Müller published his *Comparative Mythology*, Tylor was exploring Mexico and gaining first-hand anthropological data. He returned to England and in 1861 published his findings in a work entitled *Anahuac: Or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*.

Although he would never conduct first-hand field research again, his curiosity about cultures had been sparked and he would spend the rest of his life in the scholarly study of them. The present-day anthropological scholar, Jerry Moore, summarizes his definition of culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society', which Moore claimed was 'the only one most anthropologists can quote correctly, and the one they fall back on when others prove too cumbersome'.<sup>267</sup> For the interests of this study, one must look within Tylor's examination of culture in its entirety to how he saw myth specifically as one component. His most important contribution for this study and the study of myth in general came in 1871 with the publication of *Primitive Culture*; not only because it is the best explanation of Tylor's own theories, but because of the influence it had on the scholars who followed him. Therefore, a brief explanation of Tylor's theories as

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<sup>266</sup> Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>267</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1888), I, p. 1; and Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture* (Walnut Creek: Altamire, 1997), p. 17.

laid out in *Primitive Culture* is in order before proceeding to an exploration of *Vafþrúðnismál*.

### Primitive Culture and 'Survivals'

As one of his biographers, Robert Ackerman, summarized, Tylor's aim was to reconstruct the prehistory of mankind.<sup>268</sup> His theory, which as noted above is now known as unilinear evolution, started with the assumption that some sort of basic unity exists among human beings, and that the similarities between human cultures far outweigh their differences. The similar ways in which humans react to problems and reason out solutions are a strong indication of this unity. From this assumption, Tylor postulated that an organic law of development or evolution operates in the growth of human institutions. Change was gradual and orderly, and it was essentially the same anywhere in the world, moving from a society that believed in myths to one based around religion and then finally to a system of science.<sup>269</sup> Modern human societies, which were once simple and confused, had become complex and highly coordinated over the passage of time. Yet what Tylor saw as simple and confused societies still existed in his 19<sup>th</sup> century world. According to Tylor, tribesmen from Greenland or the New Zealand Maori, were examples of simple societies still extant in his world, and modern Europeans could glimpse the former state of their own society by studying them.<sup>270</sup> Because he saw the rational reactions of human beings as so fundamental to their nature, Tylor felt that the progression of a culture from a simple state to a complex one was similar for all people, regardless of where or when they lived. His problem however, was finding

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<sup>268</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, p. 36.

<sup>269</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 27.

<sup>270</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 21.



evidence of the archaic, simple states of the nineteenth-century's now complex cultures, so that he could then compare them to the nineteenth-century's simple cultures thereby demonstrating evolutionary progression. He solved his problem by introducing the concept of 'survivals'.

Ackerman and Moore agree that Tylor's definition of survivals has long been accepted in academia as 'objects or traits or attitudes with a *raison d'être* in one developmental stage that had become obsolete or misunderstood because they had, through social conservatism "survived" into a new, higher stage in which they were nonfunctional. Thus the magician's rattle and the warrior's bow and arrow become children's toys.'<sup>271</sup> One of Tylor's examples, which still has currency today, comes from Central America where a certain god represented the tempest storm. This god was called Hurakan, a name that has been preserved and reinterpreted into the English language as 'hurricane', a term still used to describe a specific type of weather storm.<sup>272</sup>

Survivals can be more than material objects and adapted names, they can be narratives as well. Tylor states:

every tale that was ever told has a meaning for the times it belongs to; even a lie [...] thus, as evidence of the development of thought, as records of long past belief and usage, even in some measure as materials for the history of the nations owning them, the old myths have fairly taken their place among historic facts.<sup>273</sup>

In other words, myths can show us what the ancient, simple states of the nineteenth-century's now complex cultures were like. Ancient Norse society cannot be

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<sup>271</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, pp. 36-38; Moore, *Visions of Culture*, p. 21. For Tylor's expanded explanation of the bow and arrow survival, see Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 72-73.

<sup>272</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 363.

<sup>273</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 281.

recreated, but according to Tylor a window into it can be achieved from analysis of that society's surviving myths.<sup>274</sup> With the appropriate source material, one may be able to see what Norse society looked like in its simple, ancient state.

*Vafþrúðnismál* will be the source material we will test later in this chapter, but discussion will also be made of the works of Snorri and whether these are indications of Tylor's 'myth' stage of development, or if they are better understood as the later 'religion' stage.

Tylor argues that myth arises and functions solely to explain events in the physical world.<sup>275</sup> This theory is characterized as an example of "intellectualism", and suggests that myths arise from the attempt made by primitive people to reason. The result is aetiological tales that explain how the world came to be the way it is and how it operates now.<sup>276</sup> Tylor sees primitive man as if he were a reasoning child, reasoning because rationality is a capacity of all humankind, but childlike because he is still a member of a simple society. This man assumes that everything around him which is having an effect upon him has a spirit/soul/will/consciousness just as he does. What this means is that primitive man personifies the forces that are affecting him.<sup>277</sup> Thus, if the wind had been personified, stories would then have emerged explaining what the personification of the wind was actually doing in order to cause the wind to blow. These stories form the basis of myth. And we will see

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<sup>274</sup> 'Survivals' as a concept were a huge break from the scholarship of the time which wanted to see mankind as a product of biblical perfection, moving throughout the years. According to Robert Fraser it 'stated that man had started from a state of perfection and had simply run to seed. This was the biblical view, the view of the writer of Genesis, but it could also be found in Hesiod and achieved perhaps its most memorable expression in Virgil's fourth eclogue. It could also be extracted from [...] Thomas Malthus, who thought that the increases in population were bit by bit depriving man of his livelihood.' Robert Fraser, *The Making of the Golden Bough*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 12-15. William Jones and Müller only added to the problem by championing the idea of an original universal language that all European societies were moving away from. Tylor unfortunately never explicitly explained why survivals actually survived.

<sup>275</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 285.

<sup>276</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, p. 54.

<sup>277</sup> According to Tylor, a modern survival of this tendency is how we will attempt to harm an in-animate object which has done us harm, such as kicking a chair upon which we have stubbed a toe. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 284-286.

this, for example, in *Vafþrúðnismál* when a giant eagle sits at the end of the world, flapping his wings to cause the wind.

Tylor provides his own examples to document this approach to understanding the foundations of myth, and they include some references to Nordic material. The discussion in *Primitive Culture* of the sun and moon as the physical representations of a deity's eyes is particularly revealing.

Tylor begins by identifying a contemporary cultural belief: New Zealanders of Tylor's nineteenth century believed that their chief god Maui set one of his own eyes up in the heavens to be the Sun. Maui then used the eyes of his two children to form the stars that are seen in the morning and evening.<sup>278</sup> From this starting point, Tylor then looks for similar stories among other cultures. First he references an Orphic poem about the Roman god Jove (Jupiter) where it is said that 'his glorious head irradiates the sky where hangs his starry hair, the waters of the sounding ocean are the belt that girds his sacred body the earth omnipotent, his eyes are sun and moon'. Then Tylor expands his source material to include what he calls other 'Aryan' examples. In the Indian *Rig-Veda*, the sun was the 'eye of Mitra, Varuna and Agni'. The Persian *Zend-Avesta* calls the sun 'the eye of Ahura-Mazda', Greek Hesiod called it the 'all-seeing eye of Zeus' and the Roman Macrobius completes the circle by returning to the first example when he calls the sun 'the eye of Jove'.<sup>279</sup>

Fortunately for this study, Tylor does not stop there. He continues his exploration with an analysis of Óðinn, whom he sees as the equivalent to the Old German Wuotan. Tylor feels that there are two narrative elements concerning Óðinn that can identify him as a sun deity, both of which concern his eye(s) or power of

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<sup>278</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 350. For Tylor's source for the Maui narrative, and an example of early nineteenth century anthropological documentation, see Joel Samuel Polack, *Manners and Customs of the New Zealanders* (Christchurch: Capper Press, 1976), pp. 15-16.

<sup>279</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 351.

sight. First there is his perch atop the Hliðskjálf. From this position he can look over the entire world seeing the deeds of men, an ability similar to the sun's position in the sky and its light spreading across the world. Remember, too, that Óðinn only has one eye; the one he lost is pledged to Mimir for a drink from his well. Therefore, if the eye Óðinn retains in his head, the one he uses while sitting on the Hliðskjálf, is meant to be the sun, Tylor postulates that the eye lost to the well is 'perhaps the sun's own reflection in any pool, or more likely that of the moon, which in popular myth is told of as found in the well'.<sup>280</sup>

It is odd, however, that though Tylor is aware of the stories concerning Óðinn's eye, he does not reference the story of Þjazi, a giant killed by the gods. When this giant's daughter came to protest her father's death, Óðinn took Þjazi's eyes and threw them up into heaven and made two stars out of them, 'kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stjörnur tvær'.<sup>281</sup>

### *Interpreting Vafþrúðnismál*

How well then does Tylor's method of interpretation work when applied to Old Norse material, specifically in an examination of *Vafþrúðnismál*? This poem is preserved in both the Codex Regius and *AM* 728 | 4to manuscripts, though only partially in the latter. It contains 55 strophes in the *ljóðaháttir* and *galdralag* metres, both of which are poetic styles in which each strophe contains four lines and are primarily intended for the representation of speech, either in dialogue form or direct monologue.<sup>282</sup> The back-and-forth dialogues found in the poem always contain the

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<sup>280</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 351-52.

<sup>281</sup> *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Faulkes, I, p. 2.

<sup>282</sup> See Russell Poole, 'Metre and Metrics' in Rory McTurk, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 268-269 for a detailed explanation of these two poetic metres and a *Vafþrúðnismál* example.

character Óðinn. The second character is either his wife Frigg or the giant Vafþrúðnir. The question of dating remains a problem with the style and form of the poem suggesting very different dates of composition. However as Christopher Abram argues, given the poem's physical appearance in the Codex Regius, with abbreviated names and no formal title, the assumption could be made that the readers of the manuscript were expected to be already familiar with the tale.<sup>283</sup> This in turn suggests that the story was well known prior to the late thirteenth century composition of the Codex Regius, at least to the extent that the compiler felt comfortable with making abbreviations.<sup>284</sup>

Briefly summarized, Óðinn decides he wants to test his wisdom against that of Vafþrúðnir and Frigg tries to dissuade him from doing so. Óðinn perseveres and goes to the home of the giant in disguise. The two then take turns asking one another questions about topics such as the way the universe operates or historical events both past and future. The dialogue continues until one of them is unable to answer. Óðinn proves to be victorious when he asks a question that only he himself could know the answer to and the poem concludes. As with the material we examined in the first chapter, the overall story is not what is important to us here, but rather its constituent parts. Tylor himself employed this same technique: he was a prime example of a sampling scholar who would choose to examine parts of a myth but not the myth as a whole. However, pieces of evidence still need to be seen as parts of a larger whole if we are to explore a possible evolutionary progression of Old Norse society. To do this we shall undertake an examination of certain sections of *Vafþrúðnismál*, and then sections of Snorri's *Prose Edda* to see how the narrative

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<sup>283</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 224.

<sup>284</sup> For Simek's argument that the dialogue form was an indication of thirteenth century composition, see Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 345.

developed in the time between *Vafþrúðnismál*'s debated origin and Snorri's thirteenth-century retelling of it.

### Eclipses

A good example to begin to apply Tylor's methods to Old Norse sources is, ironically, found near the end of the poem. In strophes forty-six and seven, we are told that eclipses are caused by the wolf Fenrir assailing the sun, here named 'Álfrøðull/Elf-disc'. In strophe forty-seven the poet states:

Eina dóttur berr Álfrøðull,  
áðr hana Fenrir fari;  
sú scal ríða, þá er regin deyia,  
móður brautir mæ. <sup>285</sup>

Elf-disc will bear a daughter,  
before Fenrir assails her;  
she shall ride, when the Powers die,  
the girl on her mother's paths. <sup>286</sup>

In addition to providing us with the names of the celestial actors, this *Vafþrúðnismál* passage reveals that the Old Norse system of thought allowed for the idea that the sun then seen in the sky may not be the same sun that had always been there. A generational change is foretold by saying that Álfrøðull will have a daughter prior to Fenrir causing her demise. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri relates the myth in a slightly different version:

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<sup>285</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.54.

<sup>286</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 47.

Skjótt ferr sólin, ok nær svá sem hon sé hrædd, ok eigi mundi hon þá meir hvata gongunni at hon hræddisk bana sinn...Þat eru tveir úlfar, ok heitir sá er eptir henna ferr Skoll. Hann hræðisk hon ok hann mun taka hann, en sá heitir Hati Hróðvitnisson er fyrir henna hleypr, ok vill hann taka tunglit, ok svá mun verða.

The sun moves fast, almost as if she was afraid, and she would not be able to go any faster if she was in terror of her death ... it is two wolves, and the one that is going after her is called Skoll. She is afraid of him and he will catch her, and the one that is running ahead of her is called Hati Hrodvitnisson, and he is trying to catch the moon, and that will happen.<sup>287</sup>

While this passage also confirms an understanding of the mortality of the Norse sun, the concept, expressed here as that of a monster assaulting a heavenly body, is by no means unique to Old Norse mythology. In fact, Tylor provides so many complementary examples of it that it serves as a perfect illustration of his basic premise that primitive man anthropomorphized the natural phenomena he experienced. We learn from Tylor that during a lunar eclipse, the Chiquitos of South America said that a pack of dogs were hunting the moon and the eclipse occurred when they caught it and bit into it, the red hue of the moon representing the blood from the bite wounds. A similar example of animal imagery comes from the Tupi of Brazil who Tylor says believed the event to be a jaguar consuming the sun.<sup>288</sup>

Tylor's pool of references expands even farther if we drop the animal character and just look for stories of the sun or moon being eaten. Again, Tylor tells us that the South Sea islanders of the Western Pacific stated that an eclipse occurred when a deity swallowed either celestial body and was then induced by offerings to release the luminaries from its stomach. The Hindus said that the severed head of a

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<sup>287</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 14; *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), pp. 14-15.

<sup>288</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 328-330.

demon called Râhu tirelessly pursues the Sun and Moon across the sky, with an eclipse happening when he catches one. The eclipse quickly passes since the demon has no body in which to hold the luminary. When he swallows, the Sun or Moon passes through.<sup>289</sup>

Juxtaposing *Vafþrúðnismál* and Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, one can see that personification had already taken place by the time of the earlier composition of *Vafþrúðnismál*. The sun has been given a name and the ability to bear children. Later, Snorri exaggerates these anthropomorphic characteristics even further. He has given the sun human emotions and the fear of death. This provides us with a hint of the evolutionary progression Tylor would argue had taken place in Old Norse society from the time of *Vafþrúðnismál*'s composition to Snorri's later rendition. This is something that will continue to become more evident as more sections are examined. However, this also reveals a difficult question for Tylor's theories. Are we seeing here an example of societal evolution or rather one individual's adaptation of his culture's mythological narratives in order to craft a more complete story? A key problem is that for Tylor's argument to be applicable there has to be a suggestion of societal belief in these evolved deities of Snorri, which is something that does not exist for the sun or its *canis lupus* pursuers as detailed in the source material.

### **Celestial Movement and Parentage**

A second aspect of the *Vafþrúðnismál* poem that concerns us is the genealogy and movements of the celestial bodies. This is noteworthy because Tylor provides specific examples from other cultures that are similar. Snorri also offers an expanded explanation of these particular elements of the poem, further

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<sup>289</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 330-331.



demonstrating the expansion the myth underwent as it moved from single lines in an oral poem to a written narrative story.

In the eleventh and thirteenth strophes of *Vafþrúðnismál*, there are the following exchanges:

(11)

hvé sá hestr heitir, er hverian dregr  
dag of dróttmogo.

Skinfaxi heitir, er inn skíra dregr  
dag um dróttmogo;  
hesta bestr þykkir hann með Hreiðgotom,  
ey lýsir mon af mari.<sup>290</sup>

(13)

hvé sá iór heitir, er austan dregr  
nótt of nýt regin.

Hrímfaxi heitir, er hveria dregr  
nótt of nýt regin;  
méldropa fellir hann morgin hvern,  
þaðan kómr dagg um dala.<sup>291</sup>

(11)

what that horse is called who draws every day to mankind?

Shining-mane, the shining one is called who draws day to mankind; the best of horses he is held to be among the Hreið-Goths, always that horse's mane gleams.<sup>292</sup>

(13)

what that horse is called who from the east draws night to the beneficent gods?

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<sup>290</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 45-46.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 41.

Frost-mane he is called, who draws every night to the beneficent gods; foam from his bit he lets fall every morning; from there dew comes to the valleys.<sup>293</sup>

Vafþrúðnir states in strophe twenty-five that:

Dellingr heitir, hann er Dags faðar,  
enn Nótt var Nørvi borin.<sup>294</sup>

Delling he is called, he is Day's father,  
and Night was born of Norr.<sup>295</sup>

This practice of identifying the progenitors of natural phenomena exists throughout the poem. In the twenty-third strophe it is said that:

Mundilfæri heitir, hann er Mána faðir  
oc svá Sólar iþ sama.<sup>296</sup>

Mundilfæri he is called, the father of Moon  
and likewise of Sun.<sup>297</sup>

It is significant that according to the giant Vafþrúðnir, there was a separation between the Old Norse idea of the sun and the period of time day, as well as between the moon and night. Put slightly differently, it is noteworthy that the two time periods day and night are personified as separate entities from the sun and moon personifications. Tylor would likely find this similar to the Karen (Burmese) tale of the character 'Ta Ywa', a personification of the day who flees from the sun, or in myths found in parts of South Africa where the night is thought to be a monster

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<sup>293</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 42.

<sup>294</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.49.

<sup>295</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 44.

<sup>296</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.48.

<sup>297</sup> Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 43.

which has imprisoned the world, and it can only be chased away by the ‘dawning sun’,<sup>298</sup>

Snorri offers us some expansions on this theme. In *Gylfaginning* he begins by saying:

Then they [Bor’s sons] took molten particles and sparks that were flying uncontrolled and had shot out of the world of Muspell and set them in the middle of the firmament of the sky both above and below to illuminate heaven and earth. They fixed all the lights, some in the sky, some moved in a wandering course beneath the sky, but they appointed them positions and ordained their courses. Thus it is said in ancient sources that by means of them days were distinguished and also the count of years [...]<sup>299</sup>

What work Snorri was referencing by saying ‘it is said in ancient sources’ is not explained. After this passage, he goes on to quote the fourth strophe of *Vǫlospá*, but there is no strophe in *Vǫlospá* that speaks of Bor’s sons fixing lights in the sky. So, though it cannot be determined where it comes from, the above passage could be seen as what Snorri saw as the older belief of his people, utilizing the phrase ‘ancient sources’ as an indication of what might now be called handed down public knowledge.

The evolving process that Tylor would argue the Norse society was undergoing can be seen when Snorri provides his own explanation of the celestial bodies, based largely on the details previously seen from *Vafþrúðnismál*:

Norfi or Narfi was the name of a giant who lived in Giantland. He had a daughter called Night. She was black and dark in accordance with her ancestry. She was married to a person called Naglfari. Their son was called Aud. Next she was married to someone called Annar.

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<sup>298</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, pp. 337-38.

<sup>299</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), p. 12.

Their daughter was called Iord [Earth]. Her last husband was Delling, he was of the race of the Æsir. Their son was Day. He was bright and beautiful in accordance with his father's nature. Then All-father took Night and her son Day and gave them two horses and two chariots and set them up in the sky so that they have to ride around the earth every twenty-four hours. Night rides in front on the horse called Hrimfaxi, and every morning he bedews the earth with the drips from his bit. Day's horse is called Skinfaxi [shining-mane], and light is shed over all the sky and sea from his mane.

[...]

There was a person whose name was Mundilfæri who had two children. They were so fair and beautiful that he called the one Moon and his daughter Sol [sun], and gave her in marriage to a person called Glen. But the gods got angry at this arrogance and took the brother and sister and set them up in the sky; they made Sol drive the horses that drew the chariot of the sun which the gods had created, to illuminate the worlds, out of the molten particle that had flown out of the world of Muspell. The names of these horses are Arvak and Alsinn. Under the shoulders of the horses the gods put two bellows to cool them, and in some sources it is called ironblast. Moon guides the course of the moon and controls its waxing and waning.<sup>300</sup>

Understanding the Old Norse system according to Snorri, therefore, is more complex than it might appear at first glance. In the first passage of *Gylfaginning*, which Snorri claims is based on the ancient sources, we have an explanation that is static: bits of molten matter were fixed in place, or set on a fixed orbit, at the time of creation. But in the later passages where Snorri is providing his own summary, there is a recognized dynamic that is ongoing, accounting for both the passage of time (day and night as well as years) and the warming of the earth (as a result of the bellows blowing heat off of the horses' bodies). The sun and the moon are now distinct from day and night. All of this is reflected in the anthropomorphized figures

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<sup>300</sup> Snorri Sturluson: *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), pp. 13-14. Translator's additions.

and the expressions of familial and generational complexity, descent and/or equality: husband and wife, father and daughter, mother and son, sister and brother.

It is particularly striking that the Old Norse mythological system has a parent for day and night and a separate parent for sun and moon.<sup>301</sup> When discussing a particular culture, Tylor often identifies and examines the offspring of the sun and moon, as with the New Zealanders' stories of Maui, but he does not discuss the celestial bodies' parents themselves.<sup>302</sup> In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor often provides analysis of the sun and moon where they are found as a brother and sister pairing as in the case of the Ottawa Indians of North America. Other alternatives are as a husband and wife union, or a combination of the two where they are both married and siblings such as the Peruvian characters 'Ynti' and 'Quilla', but nowhere does Tylor discuss the significance for cultures who have parents for these key figures.<sup>303</sup>

From a modern contemporary view, or a 'scientific' position as Tylor would likely classify it, one may have trouble divorcing the object of the sun, or at the very least the light it gives off, from the concept of the time period called day. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine describing the term night without necessarily tying it to the lack of the sun's light. However, for many early cultures, this was not a problem. The sun and the day did not have to be the same thing, linked to the same thing or represented by the same anthropomorphic figure. Additionally, the sun that was visible in the sky was not necessarily the sun that had always been there, which, though Tylor himself does not directly address this exact point, he does tangentially give evidence of it, such as the Karen example above.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> The importance of identifying an individual's father, combined with the Norse patronymic naming system, suggest a male-dominated culture.

<sup>302</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 335. See above page 99 for the story of Maui.

<sup>303</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 289.

<sup>304</sup> See above, page 111 for the Karen example.

Most of the evidence of similar expressions of lineage can be found in the mythological systems with which he and his fellow Victorians were most familiar, that of the Greeks and the Egyptians. In Hesiod's epic poem *Theogony*, the reader is introduced to night (Nyx) and Erebus, two deities that were the products of an asexual reproduction from chaos near the beginning of the poem. These two then sexually mate to bring about day (Hemera) and space (Aether). It is not until later in the poem that the sun (Helios), the moon (Selene), and the dawn (Eos) are introduced, all of whom are children of the two titans Hyperion and Theia. They therefore have no genealogical links to night or day, who came from chaos. It is interesting to note that this lack of relationship is identical to that of the sun and moon, night and day found in the above Norse examples.<sup>305</sup>

Similarities continue when one looks at the movement of the Greek's celestial bodies. According to the thirty-first Homeric hymn, the Greek personification of the sun, Helios, was thought to drive a chariot representing the sun across the sky each day.<sup>306</sup> This chariot was drawn by a collection of horses which the Roman Ovid in his *Metamorphosis* called by the names 'Pyröus' (hot), 'Aethon' (light), 'Phlegon' (fiery), and 'Eöus' (bright).<sup>307</sup> The Homeric Hymn 32 tells a similar story about the moon, Selene. Once Helios has run his daily course, Selene emerges from the sea to also drive a chariot across the sky:

But when the Moon divine from Heaven is gone  
Under the sea, her beams within abide,  
Till, bathing her bright limbs in Ocean's tide,  
Clothing her form in garments glittering far,

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<sup>305</sup> Hesiod: *Theogony*, ed. by M.L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp.115-116, 126; Hesiod: *Theogony and Works And Days*, trans. by M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 6, 14.

<sup>306</sup> Hesiod: *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 459.

<sup>307</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, trans. by John Minellius (London: T. Cox, 1741), p. 48.

And having yoked to her immortal car  
The beam-invested steeds whose necks on high  
Curve back, she drives to a remoter sky.<sup>308</sup>

While these horse-drawn examples are very similar to the *Vafþrúðnismál* explanations seen above, the ancient Egyptians had an even more detailed and generationally connected system. There are no specific personifications of either night or day, but the sun is explicitly identified as a parent of other parts of the celestial cast of characters. Though the Egyptian belief system changed over time, some accounts hold that the sun god, Ra, was the son of Nu (a god of empty space) and Neith (a goddess of the hunt). Among Ra's own children were Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture). These two would have their own children, Nut (sky) and Geb (earth). This genealogy demonstrates the particular importance the sun held for the Egyptians. Nothingness preceded it and from the sun all things followed, including the sky in which it moves and the earth it moves above.<sup>309</sup>

It is clear that even though Tylor does not specifically address it in his *Primitive Culture* writings, the idea of parents for the sun, moon, day and night, is not something unique to Old Norse society. And while the complexity inherent in this characterization can be seen as part of the Norse society's evolutionary progression, questions still remain. Are the parents of the current celestial bodies meant to be understood as previous forms of those bodies? In other words, did the former sun and the current sun have the same physical appearance to the human observer? How were the time period personifications, day and night, understood to interact with the celestial body representations, sun and moon? Why was day linked

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<sup>308</sup> *Hesiod*, trans. by Evelyn-White, pp.459-461.

<sup>309</sup> For an overview of the Ancient Egyptian mythological system and the ways it changed over the course of different dynastic periods, see Claude Traunecker, *The Gods of Egypt*, trans. by David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

to mankind and night linked to the gods? Moreover, if there was an evolutionary progression between a simpler understanding by Norse society, as evidenced by *Vafþrúðnismál* or the early parts of *Gylfaginning*, and a more complex interpretation in the later parts of Snorri's work, what were the differences and what is their import?

Snorri attempts to summarize the events occurring in the sky as told in both *Vafþrúðnismál* and in his reference to ancient sources, but the problem is that he provides no indication of his rationale for doing so. If we were not examining Snorri with Tylor in mind, it would appear as though he had contradicted or at the very least confused himself as to the origin of the celestial bodies. But, when taking Tylor's arguments into account, Snorri's expansion of the narrative is a good example of the Tylor's theory concerning the changes a myth undergoes as time passes. The initial stages in the evolutionary progression are *Vafþrúðnismál*'s original form, which we admittedly know only in the preserved form of a later transcription, and the ancient sources Snorri claims to be quoting. Further evidence might be the fourth strophe of *Vǫlospá*, since Snorri quotes it, however it does not appear to form the basis of any of his narrative, certainly not in the way the content of *Vafþrúðnismál* does. But an evolved stage can be seen as the latter part of Snorri's expanded anthropomorphic narrative, where he endeavours to explain much of the celestial drama in terms based around human interactions. While there are anthropomorphic elements in *Vafþrúðnismál*, it is only in Snorri's later narrative that we see the deliberate effort to personify all the important parties. Tylor would have to argue that this represents an indication of a developing society whose intellectualism felt the ever-growing need to explain things through rational and human terms.



The greater detail and complexity in Snorri's narrative, in comparison to what is found in the poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, could serve to validate Snorri's stature as a later thinker who was farther down the path of societal development. However, there still remains no suggestion that Snorri's expanded narrative reflected a larger societal position of true belief, certainly not the belief of Snorri's present day society. One could argue that Snorri represents an even later stage of development that followed the worship of these fully anthropomorphized figures when he functions as a chronicler of something to which he had no firsthand knowledge. While this would be fine for Tylor's idea of a developing society, there is still no evidence that the crucial period of worship actually took place, at least not which can be ascertained from the writing of Snorri.

### **Disembodied Cosmography**

With this personification of forces in mind, consider the twenty-first strophe of *Vafþrúðnismál*:

Ór Ymis holdi var iqrð um sçpuð,  
enn ór beinom biqrq,  
himinn ór hausi ins hrímkalda iqtuns,  
enn ór sveita siór.

From Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,  
and the mountains from his bones;  
the sky from the skull of the frost-cold giant,  
and the sea from his blood.<sup>310</sup>

Then in strophe thirty-one and thirty-three, *Vafþrúðnir* continues:

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<sup>310</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.48; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 43.

Ór Òlívágom stucco eitrdropar,  
svá óx, unz varð ór iqtunn;  
(þar órar ættir kómo allar saman,  
því er þat æ alt til atalt).

Undir hendi vaxa qváðo hrímþursi  
mey oc mōg saman;  
fótr við fœti gat ins fróða iqtuns  
sexhōfðaðan son.

Out of Elivagar sprang poison-drops,  
so they grew until a giant came of them;  
[from there our clan all came,  
thus they are all terrifying.]

They said that under the frost-giant's arms  
a girl and boy grew together;  
one foot with the other, of the wise giant,  
begot a six-headed son.<sup>311</sup>

The key ideas for our consideration here are that Ymir came from the poison drops of Ólívágr and that he could reproduce asexually. *Grímnismál* expands on this explanation by restating the above, adding that the trees were created from his hair, 'baðmr ór hári' and then continuing in strophe forty-one:

Enn ór hans brám gerðo blíð regin  
miðgarð manna sonom;  
enn ór ahns heila vóro þau in harðmóðgo  
scý qll um scōpuð.

And from his eyelashes the cheerful gods  
made earth in the middle for men;  
and from his brain were the hard-tempered clouds

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<sup>311</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 50-51; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 45.

all made.<sup>312</sup>

This is similar to the reference discussed previously concerning Jove and the parts of his body which were thought by the Romans to make up the world and heavens. Furthermore, there are creation myths based on deity dismemberment from all over the world. The Aztecs believed that the earth was made from the belly of a serpent called Cipactli, and the Babylonians had a similar monster called Tiamat whose body was used to form the earth and heavens while the blood of her son, Kingu, was used to create mankind.<sup>313</sup> Hindus believed that devas used the dismembered mind, eyes and breath of the deity Purusha to create the moon, sun and wind.<sup>314</sup> Yet more than these potential parallels, the *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál* explanation of these creation elements tells us something about the Norse evolutionary progression. For Tylor, this poetic excerpt, when compared against Snorri's narrative expansion of it (which will be examined shortly), reinforces the idea that substantial development of Norse culture took place between *Vafþrúðnismál*'s original form, whatever that might have been, and Snorri's expansion of its themes. However before Snorri's version can be examined, one further variable needs to be added.

The poems of the *Poetic Edda* actually contain accounts of two potential series of events leading to and involving the creation of the world. As seen above, *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* argue that the components of the world were created from the body of Ymir. The second option comes from *Völuspá*, which also begins

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<sup>312</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.65; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 57.

<sup>313</sup> See Kay Almere Read, *Mesoamerican Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 260-261 for the Aztec creation summary; *Myths from Mesopotamia*, trans. by Stephanie Dalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 255-257 for the entire Babylonian cosmography narrative.

<sup>314</sup> *Sacred Writings: Hinduism*, trans. by Ralph Griffith (New York: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992), pp. 602-603.

its progression with Ymir. The third strophe reads, ‘Ár var alda, þar er Ymir byggði’ or ‘it was early in the ages when Ymir made his dwelling’ and at this time there was no sand, sea, earth or heaven.<sup>315</sup> However, unlike the previous two poems, this is all that the *Völuspá* poet says of Ymir. Credit for the creation of the earth goes to the sons of Burr who ‘bioðom um ypðo’ or ‘brought up the earth’.<sup>316</sup> Ymir makes his dwelling, but he does it in a void. Though these accounts may differ on the origin of the earth, they agree that there was a period of time that preceded the creation of the earth. *Vafþrúðnismál*’s chronology of events suggests that Élivágr was the first thing in existence, whereas *Völuspá* begins with Ymir. These would appear to be conflicting stories, but given Tylor’s idea of a developing society, that may not be as significant a problem as it would be for another theorist. The simple answer for Tylor would be to say that the different poems come from different stages of the Norse society’s evolution, or even different periods and different places that were merely brought together by the compiler of the Codex Regius manuscript.

Snorri sees the gaps and discrepancies in these two chronologies and tries to rectify them. Interestingly, he starts by quoting the third strophe of *Völuspá* from the previous paragraph but focuses on the fact that there was nothing in existence, instead of quoting the first line of the strophe, ‘Ár var alda, þar er Ymir byggði’, which states Ymir was making his dwelling at this time. Snorri then explains that parts of the rivers called Élivágr formed a solid rime across the Ginnungagap. In the middle of this area, where the warmth from the region Muspell and the cold from Niflheim met, the rime melted and reformed into the form of a man, and this was

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<sup>315</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.4. Though Larrington understands the use of ‘byggja’ to mean building a home, an alternative could be that the poet simply means to say that it was at this time that Ymir lived or existed, not necessarily going so far as to say he built a dwelling.

<sup>316</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.1.

Ymir. Snorri then directly quotes strophe thirty-one of *Vafþrúðnismál*, as given above, and concludes with a re-summation of the thirty-third strophe:

And it is said that when he slept, he sweated. Then there grew under his left arm a male and a female, and one of his legs begot a son with the other, and descendants came from the. These are frost-giants.<sup>317</sup>

We can see Snorri's rationalization at work here. He draws on the *Vafþrúðnismál* explanation of Ymir arising as a result of heat and liquid in relation to the Élivágr, and then extends that to explain the development of some of his progeny from sweat, another liquid that is the result of heat. *Vafþrúðnismál* states that a male and female grew under Ymir's arm, but does not mention sweat as the catalyst. Snorri made an obvious rational extension of the story by including the element of sweat found in armpits.

Snorri then introduces a cow, Auðhumla, which also emerges from the rime and provides milk as nourishment for Ymir. This cow, which only appears in Snorri's account, fed itself on the rimestones, and as it licked away at the stones, Snorri states, the shape of a man emerged. This man was called Búri, who somehow had a son called Borr. Borr married a woman called Bestla and they had three sons named Óðinn, Vili and Vé. These three sons of Borr then killed Ymir whose blood caused a flood that drowned almost all of the frost giants, only Bergelmir and his family escaped. The sons of Borr took Ymir's body out to the middle of the Ginnungagap and then:

[...] out of him made the earth, out of his blood the sea and the lakes. The earth was made of the flesh and the rocks of the bones, stone and scree they

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<sup>317</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), p. 11.

made out of the teeth and molars and of the bones that had been broken [...] They also took his skull and made out of it the sky [...] But on the earth on the inner side they made a fortification round the world against the hostility of giants, and for this fortification they used the giant Ymir's eyelashes [...] They also took his brains and threw them into the sky and made out of them the clouds.<sup>318</sup>

Snorri then quotes strophe forty and forty-one of *Grímmismál* to support his summary, although he does not name his source as he does when quoting *Völuspá*.

There are two conclusions that can be drawn after examining Snorri's explanation of the beginning of the world. The first is that Snorri was a scholar who was trying to incorporate all of the information he had to hand. He obviously was aware of both the '*Völuspá* Borr's sons' and the '*Vafþrúðnismál* / *Grímnismál* Ymir's Body' series of events, and rather than favouring one above the other, he chose to combine the two as best he could. Tylor's explanation could additionally claim that Snorri is adding complexity to the characterization process of the earlier Old Norse creation narrative as part of its evolutionary development. In all three narratives, we have specific characters who are the agents of change; however their significance is different in each. *Vafþrúðnismál* / *Grímnismál* agree that the parts of the world come from Ymir, but no one is given responsibility for dismembering Ymir and putting the parts in place. *Völuspá* credits the sons of Bur for 'bringing up' the earth, but out of what we are not told. Only Snorri gives a character that is responsible for each step. Ymir is the source of the world's parts. He is killed by the sons of Borr, an individual who is himself a descendant of Ymir. Finally, it is these sons who are responsible for shaping the world out of Ymir's parts.

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<sup>318</sup> Snorri Sturluson: *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), pp. 11-13.

Snorri's explanation on the creation of the world is perhaps the best example of expanding material found in various pieces of the *Poetic Edda*. However the question still remains if this is truly an indication of societal development. Snorri's thirteenth-century, Christian Iceland could hardly be called a primitive society and there is no evidence of religious worship associated with the details found within *Vafþrúðnismál*, or Snorri's explanation of it. One possible conclusion to be drawn is that the cosmographical content of *Vafþrúðnismál* has parallels in other primitive societies from other parts of the world, thereby suggesting that Norse society had a primitive state similar to other cultures.

### **Searching for Survivals**

Finally, we need to determine if *Vafþrúðnismál* provides any specific examples of Tylor's theory of survivals. This is not easily accomplished because although the poem explains a considerable amount of information about the Old Norse cosmography, it offers few obvious insights into Old Norse society when examined through Tylor's arguments.

One could argue that the explanation of celestial movement coming about as the result of horse labour indicates the importance of horses to the early Norse. While this seems perfectly plausible, it is by no means a breakthrough in understanding Norse society as countless early cultures made use of horses. Along similar lines, it is without doubt that trees were (and continue to be) an essential component in human existence. Among the Norse, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, perhaps the most revealing bit of evidence comes in strophe forty-five, with its explanation of where and which humans will take refuge during the long winter that heralds Ragnarøk:

Líf oc Lífðrasir, enn þau leynaz muno  
í holti Hoddmimis;  
morgindoggvar þau sér at mat hafa,  
þaðan af alder alaz.

Life and Lífðrasir, and they will hide  
in Hoddmimir's wood;  
they will have the morning dew for food;  
from them the generations will spring.<sup>319</sup>

By itself, this passage is not a confirmation of a reliance, or as will be suggested later, a worship of trees. Certainly this is nothing as blatant in terms of survival evidence as Tylor's magician's rattle, but it does clearly state a reliance on trees for protection, for shelter. There is no further development of this idea in *Vafþrúðnismál*, so no firm conclusions should be drawn from it, but it is something to be kept in mind as the focus of this study shifts to the next scholar, Andrew Lang.

Instead of focusing on content, one could also argue that the form of *Vafþrúðnismál* can be seen as a survival. Though this topic will be dealt with exhaustively in the third chapter, the basic frame of *Vafþrúðnismál* is a riddle contest between two individuals, a genre that can also be seen in *Grimnismál* and the previously discussed *Alvíssmál*. Tylor felt that riddles unquestionably belonged 'to the mythologic stage of thought'.<sup>320</sup> In his opinion, the stage of development a culture was in could be assessed by the form of its riddles. In early societal stages, riddles would be 'the old-fashioned problems with a real answer intended to be discovered'. They would move towards 'the modern verbal conundrums set in the traditional form of question and answer as a way of bringing in a jest à propos of

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<sup>319</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.53; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 47.

<sup>320</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 93.



nothing' as the culture matured.<sup>321</sup> However, progression to these later stages can only come about after a culture has already made considerable mental development because 'their making requires a fair power of ideal comparison, and knowledge must have made considerable advance before this process could become so familiar as to fall from earnest into sport'.<sup>322</sup>

Tylor provides a passing example of a riddle from the Old Norse *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra*, which shall be discussed at length below, so clearly he knew of the Old Norse wisdom/riddle contest poetry genre to which *Vafþrúðnismál* belongs.<sup>323</sup> But while we know he knew of the genre in general, he is silent on the particulars of the riddle content that form a part of the *Vafþrúðnismál* narrative. He appears to be content to offer up riddles as a marker for a culture's stage of development and to leave it at that. Without the benefit of his own analysis, one can only surmise that he would classify *Vafþrúðnismál* as a product of a fairly developed culture based upon the volume and detailed knowledge required to answer the riddles presented in the poem.

### *Tylor's Problems and Snorri's Place*

Several good examples of Tylor's theories are evident from the preceding *Vafþrúðnismál* excerpts. First, certain aspects of Old Norse mythology are not unique to the Nordic society that fashioned them. In the three major sections presented above, dealing with eclipses, celestial movement and disembodied cosmography, there were striking parallels to other world cultures with which the Norse could have had no interaction. Second, it can easily be argued that early

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<sup>321</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 90.

<sup>322</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 90.

<sup>323</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 94.

Nordic people rationalized the workings of the world around them. They took what they knew from the human society in which they functioned and applied this knowledge to an interpretation of the natural world. Forces that affected them were personified, as we saw to some extent in *Vafþrúðnismál* and then even more so in Snorri's narratives. Even with the forces that were not personified by anthropomorphic characters, there is evidence that characteristics of human society were employed as a means of understanding the workings of the natural world. Horses, for instance, served as a means of human transport; therefore it was not difficult for the Norse to assume that the sun and moon, which they saw travelling across the sky, must also utilize horses to facilitate their movement. So too their explanation of an eclipse as a wolf catching the sun: if one visualizes the process of the eclipse, it is not difficult to see the appearance of a wolf's jaw swallowing a disc.<sup>324</sup>

Crucial to Tylor's argument is the concept of an evolving society, and we have seen that Snorri is an essential figure if this argument is to work in relation to the Norse. Some personification of the forces of nature can be seen in the *Poetic Edda* sources, but once the Norse myths are written down by Snorri almost every force active in the world has been personified. Snorri was a Christian, so it would have to be assumed that the versions he committed to writing captured the evolutionary process up to that point. However, there is little to suggest that Snorri's writing was a reflection of contemporary beliefs. Instead, it is far more likely that Snorri was summarizing and trying to make the ideas of a previous generation comprehensible to his readership. There is no suggestion of contemporary devotion in his writing.

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<sup>324</sup> Though this admittedly is not a common occurrence, when it did happen it would surely be memorable.

In order to fit Snorri into Tylor's evolutionary development scheme, the Icelandic cannot be placed into the myth stage of Tylor's Myth → Religion → Science progression. Snorri has to be considered as a reflection of the religion stage. Assuming one accepts that the *Prologue* to the *Prose Edda* is indeed written by Snorri, then the first line firmly identifies from what position Snorri is approaching these works.<sup>325</sup> He states:

Almáttigr guð skapaði himin ok jörð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok síðarst menn tvá er ættir eru frá kommar, Adam ok Evu

Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things in them, and lastly two humans from whom generations are descended, Adam and Eve<sup>326</sup>

Acknowledging Snorri's placement in the religion stage of development, we see that the summarizing and expansion of his narrative explanations were done without any component of personal involvement or revelation of the present state of societal development in which he lived. He was acting as an historian rather than a contemporary chronicler. He captured what he had learned of the past, not what existed in his present. To be useful as contemporary evidence of Tylor's theories, the stories in and after Snorri's time would have to say that 'God' instead of horses brought the day and night to men, and 'God' was the father of the sun and moon, not 'Mundilfœri'.<sup>327</sup> Thus, what is surprising, and fortunate, is that Snorri the Christian did not make more of these types of changes to the myths he inherited.

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<sup>325</sup> That Snorri is the author is something that is certainly disputed. See Faulkes summary of the main points of contention in *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>326</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 3; *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 1.

<sup>327</sup> Perhaps this confusion between the pagan deities and the single Christian God was already happening within *Gylfaginning* since near the beginning of the narrative, when describing the deity

Finally, what we have not been able to document well, especially in the examination of *Vafþrúðnismál*, is Tylor's theory of survivals. It appears that the poem is a reflection of riddle contests, but by Tylor's own line of argumentation, that would suggest it comes from a fairly developed society. This of course does not disqualify the practice as a survival, but it casts doubt on whether *Vafþrúðnismál* can be seen as representative of early Nordic culture.

There is also a suggestion that trees were seen as important to the Norsemen, but this is the barest suggestion. It awaits an examination of Andrew Lang's theories on magic and totemism, and their application to *Völuspá* to show us numerous examples of survivals, including some that suggest that this potential tree survival from *Vafþrúðnismál* was indeed an indication of tree worship among the early Norse.

### **Andrew Lang (1844 – 1912)**

Andrew Lang might best be described as a tireless scholar. Born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1844, by the time Lang died in 1912 at the age of 68, he had amassed an enormous personal bibliography.<sup>328</sup> Though he was an editor and avid contributor to newspapers, and an interpreter of myth which is the concern of this essay, Lang likely is best remembered for his English language fairy and folktale collections.<sup>329</sup> In this way, his contribution to English literature was similar to the Grimm brothers for German.

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Alfðór, Snorri has his characters say, 'he lives throughout all ages and rules all his kingdom and governs all things great and small [...] he made heaven and earth and the skies and everything in them'. *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes (1987), p. 9.

<sup>328</sup> For a detailed bibliography see, Roger Lancelyn Green, *Andrew Lang: A critical biography with a short-title bibliography of the works of Andrew Lang* (Leicester: Edmund Ward, 1946), pp. 241-259.

<sup>329</sup> See *Blue Fairy Book*, ed. by Andrew Lang (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005).

As detailed in the general introduction to this study, fairy and folktales are not the same as myths, and since neither Lang nor many scholars after him would be likely to classify the poems within the *Poetic Edda* as either fairy or folktales, it might be suggested that Lang is not an ideal fit for this study. However, Lang did not constrain his theories to only the fairy/folktale genre. Like Tylor, he advocated an evolutionary model for society's development. Though his ideas concerning development would often rely on folktales for evidence, Lang would just as soon use a mythological narrative if it demonstrated his argument. In order to demonstrate these arguments, most of the second half of this chapter will concern an examination of *Vǫluspá*. However, before beginning that examination, it is necessary to outline Lang's basic principles regarding mythology and their place in a given culture.

### *Six Types of Survivals*

Drawing on the scholarship of Tylor, Lang argued that the mythology of a culture often contained six different types of survivals that demonstrated the culture's early states. Unlike Müller, who was focusing on names, Lang felt these survivals were often associated with the 'irrational' aspects of myths, the magical, savage or brutal elements that later forms of modern society would shun or look down upon. He argued:

If we can prove that such a state of mind widely exists among men, and has existed, that state of mind may be provisionally considered as the fount and *origins* of the myths which have always perplexed men in a reasonable modern mental condition. Again, if it can be shown that this mental stage was one through which all civilised races have passed, the universality of the

mythopœic mental condition will to some extent explain the universal  
*diffusion* of the stories.<sup>330</sup>

The six types of survivals were Lang's way of demonstrating that this universal state  
of mind existed across mankind, regardless of time or place.<sup>331</sup>

While this study will not attempt to use Old Norse material to argue for  
universal human experiences, it will be shown to what extent the different types of  
survivals can be found in the magical, brutal or irrational qualities of Old Norse  
myths.

### **Equality**

The first of Lang's six survival categories is based on the concept that the  
savage regards all things as existing on the same level of consciousness and being.  
Similar to Tylor's theory of a reasoning child, Lang argued that the savage held that  
a rock, a tree, a dog and a human all have souls of equal quality that are worthy of  
equal respect. The result of these views would often be a deference or worship on  
the part of the savage toward a particular object. As identified previously, the  
evolutionary stage of development identified with these views is totemism. Lang  
believed totemism to be a 'chief constituent in savage society', able to arise  
anywhere in the world where there are 'men capable of conceiving kinship'.<sup>332</sup>

Though this immediately brings to mind Tylor's scholarship, Lang's position  
on this point actually was influenced by the research of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft,  
particularly his *Algonquin Researches* which examined the beliefs of the Algonquin

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<sup>330</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 8.

<sup>331</sup> Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), I,  
pp. 48-52.

<sup>332</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 60.

Native Americans. According to Schoolcraft, the Algonquins believed that ‘animals of the lowest as well as highest class in the chain of creation are alike endowed with reasoning powers and faculties; as a natural corollary to this belief they endow birds, beasts and all other animals with souls’.<sup>333</sup> Lang noted that this conviction regarding the equality of all things in some societies resulted in a refusal to kill or eat certain types of animals, such as in Australia where tribes believed it to be wrong to skin a bear, or similarly in Ireland where there was a prohibition on the skinning of seals. Another societal consequence of this belief might be the assimilation of an animal into the family, such as in New Caledonia (an island off the east coast Australia) or South Africa where children were warned not to kill lizards as they could be ancestral members of the family.<sup>334</sup> Additionally, stories of talking animals are not uncommon, manifested for instance in the Australian belief that one who is spoken to by a wild dog will be turned to stone.<sup>335</sup> To extend this reasoning from animals to objects and plants, Lang turned to the works of Johann Georg Kohl, a researcher of the North American Ojibwa people who were the originators of the term ‘totem’. Kohl told stories of a Native American traveller who had a rock that symbolized his ‘hope’ because it ‘once advanced to meet him, swayed, bowed, and went back again’.<sup>336</sup> He also spoke of a Native American who ‘revered a Canadian larch because he once heard a very remarkable rustling in its branches.’<sup>337</sup>

Unlike Schoolcraft’s or Kohl’s firsthand research, it is not possible to observe savage Norse society directly, but using Lang’s general premise, survivals of it can be found through close examination of its earliest writings, a category into

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<sup>333</sup> *Schoolcraft’s Indian Legends*, ed. by Mentor L. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1956), p.19.

<sup>334</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 59.

<sup>335</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 60.

<sup>336</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 56. See also Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Wanderings Round Lake Superior* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), pp. 58-59.

<sup>337</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 56.

which the *Poetic Edda* fits, if only by default as it is one of the very few sources we have available to us from early Nordic society. While there are no clear narratives of any specific object worship in the Norse literature, there are instances of natural objects being used in significant ways as well as narratives that contain active, speaking animals. One simple example of a talking animal would be the conversant crow from *Rígsþula*. This particular poem is contained in most modern versions of the *Poetic Edda* but it is not from the Codex Regius. It is found incomplete in the Codex Wormianus, a fourteenth century manuscript. The poem narrates the creation of the Old Norse caste society by the god Rígr, which a prose introduction tells the reader is a disguise adopted by Heimdallr. Near the end of the poem the character Konr is introduced, and in strophe 47, just before the poem abruptly ends (the poem is incomplete in its preserved form), a crow asks Konr why he is hunting the crow's fellow birds instead of leading armies and conquering territory.<sup>338</sup> This is not the sole example of important bird imagery within the Old Norse corpus but it serves to suggest that there may be evidence of totemic worship of birds among the early Nordic people.

Perhaps the most well known Norse example of particular importance being placed on specific natural objects is the apples of Iðunn. Snorri states in *Gylfaginning*, 'She keeps in her casket apples which the gods have to feed on when they age, and then they all become young.'<sup>339</sup> The narratives surrounding Iðunn and her apples also contain further possible survivals of Norse totemism in the form of

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<sup>338</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 252

<sup>339</sup> *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 25. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it may be that early Scandinavians had no knowledge of apples and the word 'epli' actually refers to acorns. Should this be the case, it implies a potential importance to the oak tree, a tree known for its prolific acorn shedding, which will be examined later in greater detail. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 186. This assertion is not universally shared however. Simek holds that apples could have been cultivated in Scandinavia long before the Roman era. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p. 18.



bird worship. Once again from Snorri, this time in *Skáldskaparmál*, he tells how three of the gods, Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir, attempt to cook an ox in an earth oven. Try as they might, they cannot get the ox to cook. Eventually, an eagle that happens to be perched above them in an oak tree, Old Norse ‘eik’, admits that he is the reason the ox will not cook. In fact, this eagle is actually the giant Þjazi who desires Iðunn and her apples. He forces Loki to lure Iðunn into the forest where the giant is able to abduct her. With Iðunn and her apples gone, the gods begin to age so they force Loki to attempt to rescue her. He agrees and with the help of Freyja’s ‘hawk shape (Fiaðrhamr/valshamr)’ he flies to Jötunheim. On finding Iðunn, Loki turns her into a ‘nut (hnot)’, carries her as he flies back to the gods, chased by Þjazi once again in the form of an eagle, who dies in the pursuit.<sup>340</sup>

While the ability to change shape is a facet of savage belief that shall be taken up in the next section, the story of Iðunn’s abduction suggests that, based on Lang’s principles, the argument could be made that the early Norse had some reverence for the hawk and possibly the eagle. Though the ‘theft of a life-giver’ narrative is not uncommon among European cultures, there are certain details that may have special significance to a specific culture’s version of the narrative. With the story of Iðunn, the emphasis is placed on eagles, hawks, apples and nuts, in contrast, for instance, to the Greek narrative of Persephone, where the pomegranate, the fruit with which Hades consummated his marriage to Persephone, appears to carry special significance.

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<sup>340</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 59-60.

## Magic

Lang's second principle of survivals was that savage cultures had a belief in magic. This principle permeates many of Lang's other principles and is thus deserving of significant explanation. The magic referred to by Lang was most often of a kind that focused on specific individuals in a tribal society. These individuals, often the tribal chiefs, had the ability to change shape (metamorphosis),<sup>341</sup> similar to Loki and Þjazi mentioned above. They also had the capacity to interact with the dead and the power to adversely affect enemies.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, the belief that 'like affects like', or that affecting the representation of an object would consequently affect the object itself, was fairly common.<sup>343</sup> Finally, magical abilities were often believed to be hereditary, transferring from one leader to the next.<sup>344</sup> Whichever abilities were ascribed to a chief in a culture's myths were survivals of the magic that culture believed in. As such, by examining the Old Norse sources, one should be able to identify survivals that reveal the magic the early Norse believed in.

For an Old Norse example of the presence of magic in savage society one needs to look no further than the stories surrounding the character Óðinn. Through a variety of source material, this character demonstrates evidence of almost all of Lang's descriptions of magic: metamorphic ability, interaction with the dead, the capacity to magically affect others, and the hereditary transfer of magical aptitude.

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<sup>341</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 118-120.

<sup>342</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 106-109.

<sup>343</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 96-100. This particular idea might be more familiar to modern readers as the idea of Haitian Voodoo magic.

<sup>344</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 113. However there are examples where the magical powers associated with chieftaincy were hereditary, but the position of chief did not always follow a blood line.

## *Metamorphosis*

Óðinn acts in two different ways regarding shape changing: he can either assume a human disguise, often calling himself a different name, or he can completely change shape into an animal. Examples of when he disguises himself as other humans are found in *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Grímnismál*, and *Vafþrúðnismál* where Óðinn hides his identity in order to annoy his adversary or to impart or receive wisdom.<sup>345</sup> The best example of metamorphosis into the form of animals comes from *Skáldskaparmál*. In this story Snorri retells how Óðinn, travelling under the name Bólverkr, comes to the mountain home of the giant Suttungr, keeper of the mead of poetry. Óðinn has Suttungr's brother bore a hole in the side of the mountain and then changes himself into the shape of a snake in order to crawl through it. Once Óðinn has obtained the mead, he changes himself into the shape of an eagle to escape Suttungr, who also assumes the shape of an eagle in pursuit of Óðinn.<sup>346</sup>

Not so obvious but equally revealing is the fact that Óðinn's horse Sleipnir came into existence through metamorphosis. In *Gylfaginning*, the Æsir make a wager with a builder about the speed at which he can construct a fortification around Ásgarðr. When it appears that the Æsir will lose the wager, due to the builder having a tireless horse called Svaðilfœri, they force Loki to disrupt the builder's progress. In order to do so, Loki assumes the shape of a mare and lures the builder's horse away into the forest. However, Snorri tells us that, 'Loki had had such dealings with Svaðilfœri that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal. It was grey and had eight legs, and this is the best horse among gods and men.'<sup>347</sup> This was Sleipnir and its existence suggests two things. First it reinforces how well Norse myths fit into

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<sup>345</sup> The topic of disguises will be revisited in our fourth chapter discussion of possible dramatic elements in the *Poetic Edda*.

<sup>346</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 62-64.

<sup>347</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 35-36.

Lang's theory concerning metamorphic magic, and it also supports the idea proposed in the earlier sections on Tylor and Skírnir that there was some special reverence for horses in Norse culture.

### *Necromancy*

As with metamorphosis, Óðinn's interactions concerning necromancy are very well documented in the sources. Earlier in the first chapter, the most obvious example was given when Snorri's *Gylfaginning* identifies one of Óðinn's names as 'Valfǫðr' or 'father of the slain'.<sup>348</sup> The connection to the dead is bolstered from within the *Poetic Edda*. In addition to *Vǫlospá*, which will be discussed later in more detail, the *Hávamál* poem contains several references to Óðinn's magical abilities in regards to the dead.<sup>349</sup> First, in strophe 138, he explains how he sacrificed himself to himself:

Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á  
nætr allar nío,  
geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni,  
siálfr siálfom mér,  
á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,  
hvers hann af rótom renn.<sup>350</sup>

I know that I hung on a windy tree  
nine long nights,  
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,  
myself to myself,  
on that tree of which no man knows

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<sup>348</sup> Snorri Sturluson: *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 21. See page 37. Though there may be some repetition here, the links to Lang's own citations make it necessary.

<sup>349</sup> For an argument that Óðinn is not the speaker of *Hávamál*, see Siegfried Beyschlag, 'Zur Gestalt der Hávamál: Zu einer Studie Zlaus von Sees', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 103 (1974), pp. 1-19.

<sup>350</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, I, p. 40.

from where its roots run.<sup>351</sup>

More importantly in strophe 157, detailing his magical spells which will be further examined in the next subsection of this study, Óðinn says:

Þat kann ed iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi  
váfa virgilná:  
svá ec ríst oc í rúnom fác,  
at sá gengr gumi  
oc mælir við mic.<sup>352</sup>

I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree,  
a dangling corpse in a noose;  
I can so carve and colour the runes  
that the man walks  
and talks with me.<sup>353</sup>

This is comparable to an Australian belief from the Gold Coast that Lang identified where ‘a sorcerer lying on his stomach spoke to the deceased, and the other sitting by his side received the precious messages which the dead man told’.<sup>354</sup> This ability to receive information from the dead is a vital one according to Lang.

It was also a characteristic of Óðinn to choose dead warriors to join him in his hall. Again, the Gold Coast Australians believed ‘that a powerful wizard lives far inland, and the Negroes held that to this warlock the spirits of the dead went to be judged according to the merit of their actions in life’.<sup>355</sup> From strophe eight in *Grímnismál* once again it is said by Óðinn himself (although in disguise) that:

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<sup>351</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 34.

<sup>352</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.43.

<sup>353</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 37.

<sup>354</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 108.

<sup>355</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 108.

Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimti, þars en gullbiarta  
Valhöll víð of þrumir;  
enn þar Hroptr kýss hverian dag  
vápndauða vera.<sup>356</sup>

Glaðsheim a fifth is called, there gold-bright Valhall  
Rises peacefully, seen from afar;  
There Odin chooses every day  
Those dead in combat.<sup>357</sup>

And further down in strophe fourteen of the same poem, the poet indicates that this practice was not limited to Óðinn alone.

Fólkvangr er inn níundi, enn þar Freyia ræðr  
sessa kostom í sal;  
hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag,  
enn hálfan Óðinn á.<sup>358</sup>

Folkvang is the ninth, and there Freyia arranges  
The choice of seats in the hall;  
Half the slain she chooses every day,  
And half Odin owns.<sup>359</sup>

Thus multiple characters can animate the dead and/or retrieve information from them. In this poem both Óðinn and Freyja can choose servants from among the slain. However, Freyja's powers seem more limited, as there are no examples that she is capable of the other interactions with the dead that Óðinn engages in. This, however, could be simply due to the limited quantity of surviving source literature

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<sup>356</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 58-59.

<sup>357</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 53.

<sup>358</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.60.

<sup>359</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 53.

since the fourth chapter of *Ynglinga saga* suggests that Odin learned *seiðr* from Freyja.<sup>360</sup>

### *Spellcraft*

As seen above, the 157<sup>th</sup> strophe of *Hávamál* gives an example of the actual magic Óðinn is capable of performing. Later the poet provides a detailed list of eighteen different spells that Óðinn can perform. Those deserving specific note, in addition to Óðinn's powers to control the dead, include his ability to disable enemies, enhance or strengthen the caster, deflect damage, resolve disputes, control the sea, and seduce women.<sup>361</sup>

Norse literature, in addition to providing readers with the details of Óðinn's actual magical capabilities, also provides examples of the Norse attitude towards those magical abilities. One instance of this evidence is given by Loki in *Lokasenna*. Here in strophe twenty four he says to Óðinn:

Enn þic síða kóðo Sámseyo í,  
oc draptu á vétt sem vǫlor;  
vitca líki fórtu verþiód yfir,  
oc hugða ec þat args aðal.<sup>362</sup>

But you once practised *seið* on Samsey,  
and you beat on the drum as witches do,  
in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed among mankind,  
and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> *Heimskringla*, trans. by Hollander, p. 8; *Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads, 1911), p.6.

<sup>361</sup> For a focus on the runic aspect of Óðinn's spells, see Ernst Alfred Philippson, 'Runenforschung und germanische Religionsgeschichte', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 53 (1938), pp. 321-332.

<sup>362</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.101.

<sup>363</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 89.

The term ‘seiðr’ will receive further attention later when discussing the *Völuspá* specifically, but what is important to note here is that Óðinn’s magic was regarded as a feminine practice, and Loki is admonishing him for practicing arts not proscribed to his gender.

### *Like Affecting Like*

Lang’s penultimate characteristic of savage magic is the idea that ‘like affects like’; ‘that you can injure a man, for example, by injuring his effigy’ and ‘the belief that his Shamans or medicine-men practise this art is universal among savages’.<sup>364</sup> Unfortunately, there are not many examples of this in the Old Norse sources, and the ones that can be found in the early sources focus on idolatry. Snorri, in the *Óláfs saga Helga* section of the *Heimskringla*, tells of an instance when Óláfr came across a village where people were worshipping a hollow wooden statue of Þórr as their god. They would leave food out for the god which would be gone the next day, and they believed that the god had eaten it.<sup>365</sup> Perhaps even better examples of this characteristic among the early Norse come from outside the Old Norse sources. The tenth century Muslim traveller Ibn Fadlan observed the behaviour of Vikings in Russia who also would present food to wooden idols of their gods. Although Ibn Fadlan observed dogs eating the food at night, he claimed the Vikings who presented the food believed their gods were content with the offering.<sup>366</sup> Adam of Bremen, writing in the eleventh century describes the idols the Norse worshipped at Uppsala:

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<sup>364</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 96.

<sup>365</sup> *Heimskringla*, ed. by Jónsson, pp. 284-286.

<sup>366</sup> James E. Montgomery, ‘Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah’, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), p.11.



In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather crops. The other, Wotan-that is, the Furious-carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove. The people also worship heroes made gods, whom they endow with immortality because of their remarkable exploits, as one reads in the Vita of Saint Ansgar they did in the case of King Eric [...] For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wotan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Frikko.<sup>367</sup>

There can be little doubt that the Norse believed that by appeasing these idols of their gods, they could affect the aspects of the world which the represented gods were believed to be responsible for.

### *Hereditary Abilities*

Finally, attention should be drawn to Lang's idea that the magical characteristics of a society's wizard were hereditary. It is difficult to provide evidence of this idea within the Norse mythological system since the primary character, Óðinn, is alive until the end of the world at the Ragnarøk, other than his temporary death described in *Hávamál*. However, this has not prevented at least the Icelanders from creating other historical characters who succeed their ancient deities.

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<sup>367</sup> *Adam of Bremen: History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. by Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 207-208.

In the *Ynglinga saga*, the first part of his *Heimskringla* collection and a work based upon a previous ninth century skaldic poem called *Ynglingatal*, Snorri tells the story of Óðinn and his offspring quite differently from what is contained in the *Poetic Edda* and his *Gylfaginning*. He describes Óðinn much as we have above, with many magical abilities, but eventually Óðinn does die in this narrative. Njörðr succeeds him and under his rule the people become very prosperous. Eventually Njörðr too dies and is in turn succeeded by his son Freyr.<sup>368</sup> Under Freyr the prosperity remains and he is credited with its continuation. But neither Njörðr nor Freyr are credited with the magical abilities of Óðinn, nor are they his direct blood descendants. Lang offered an analysis that said that ‘the children of Odin and of Zeus were “sacred kings”’ and that these leaders specifically, ‘like those of the Zulus and the Red Men [...] exercised an influence over the physical universe.’<sup>369</sup> Certainly this suggests that Óðinn and those others the narrative credits as being his descendents would be seen by Lang as examples of magical leaders.

The consequences of a ruler not providing prosperity are also found in *Ynglinga saga*. Some time after the rule of Freyr, a king called Dómalði came to power. However during his rule famine fell upon Sweden and neither oxen nor human sacrifices restored the fertility of the land. Eventually the regional chieftains agreed Dómalði was the problem, so they sacrificed him instead and prosperity returned.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit XXVI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1941), pp. 17-25.

<sup>369</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 117. There are also similarities among the Azande of central Africa who hold magical ability to be hereditary. See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 2.

<sup>370</sup> *Heimskringla*, trans. by Hollander, p. 8. For an argument that the sacral kingship in Nordic lands was more political than religious, see Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 92.

## Persistent Dead

The third principle of savage society is that the souls of the dead have a persistent existence and are able to affect the mortal world post-mortem. The ability of savage magicians to summon and or speak to the dead, similar to the Gold Coast Australians discussed above, is one manifestation of this characteristic. Lang states that it was thought that this was possible because souls were still tied to the world, and were therefore accessible. However, they could have more impact on the world than just imparting knowledge. Their abilities to affect the human world could also take the form of negative possession or haunting.<sup>371</sup>

Numerous examples of individuals communicating with the dead were offered in the previous section regarding necromancy. Óðinn's ability to speak with and manipulate the dead, as well as his and Freyja's shared division of the slain, also provide strong evidence for the existence of this third principle regarding the persistent dead within the Old Norse mythological system. Additional evidence can be found within the *Svipdagsmál* collection in a short poem called *Grógaldur*, where a son, Svipdag, calls his dead mother, Gróa, back from the dead in order to seek her counsel.<sup>372</sup>

As the scholar Rudolf Simek points out, the dead in Old Norse literature are usually thought of as living dead, preserved in a timeless state that is reminiscent of how they died.<sup>373</sup> They are aware of the world around their graves and can either defend or terrorize the area. Consider the thirty-fourth chapter of *Eyrbyggja saga*. After the character Þórólfr dies and is buried in a mound, he begins to terrify the

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<sup>371</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 105-106.

<sup>372</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.298. Though contained in Neckel's *Poetic Edda*, this poem is not from the Codex Regius and only found in very late 17<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts.

<sup>373</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, pp. 57-58. What we might today call a popular culture 'zombie' or, as Ellis-Davidson suggests, something similar to the central European idea of a vampire. Hilda Ellis-Davidson. *The Road to Hel*. (Westport: Greenwood P., 1943), p. 92.

inhabitants of his family farm. He haunts his wife until the stress of it kills her. After she is buried next to him, he turns his attention to haunting the entire valley. Any farm animals that came near his burial mound would die, as well as any birds that landed upon it. In an attempt to stop his terrorizing activity, his mound was opened and there lay his body, ugly but free of decomposition. To remove his threat to all who lived in the valley, his body was taken to a remote location and he was re-buried behind a very high wall. More examples of this theme can be seen in the stories of Killer Hrapp of *Laxdæla saga* and Helgi from *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana*.<sup>374</sup>

### External Qualities

The fourth survival is the belief that the characteristics that define a person may be located externally to that person's body or pinpointed on or within a specific area of the body. This idea works in conjunction with Lang's idea of magic discussed above where 'like affects like', for example to destroy a lock of a man's hair would destroy the man.<sup>375</sup>

Þórr stands as perhaps the best example of this among Old Norse mythological characters given the fact that his powers stem from and are defined by several material objects. While he is best known for the hammer Mjöllnir, according to Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, two other possessions correspond better with Lang's fourth principle. These are the belt 'megingjarðar', which doubles his might, and the gloves 'járnglófar', which he must wear in order to grip his hammer. It is logical that Þórr's strength would be manifested in these items which cover his arms and

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<sup>374</sup> For further exposition on this theory, see Hans-Joachim Klare, 'Die Toten in der altnordischen Literatur', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 8 (1933-34), pp. 1-56. Also see Folke Ström, 'Den döendes makt och Oden i trädet', *Göteborgs högskolas årsskrift*, 53:1 (Gothenburg: Erlander, 1947) for the connection of the dead in Old Norse literature to Óðin and the importance of the Yggdrasill.

<sup>375</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 96.

torso as these are the parts of the body from which one draws strength to swing a hammer.

As for the hammer itself, within the narratives it is certainly an instrument of strength that is used as a weapon. But in Old Norse society, there is ample evidence that the hammer also became a symbol of devotion, and the fact that the hammer gained religious symbolism, in conjunction or opposition to the Christian cross, only serves to reinforce its importance among the Norse.<sup>376</sup> Still, this is a fairly weak example of Lang's principle.

### Unnatural Death

The fifth societal characteristic that is manifested in survivals is the idea that death is categorically unnatural or, put another way, that the human body would never cease to function unless acted upon by some external force. For instance, Lang notes that among the African Azande tribe, death is always seen to be a product of magic or 'witchcraft'.<sup>377</sup>

Perhaps an Old Norse example of this comes in the concept of the Einherjar, but it is a far from ideal comparison. These are warriors who were chosen by the Valkyries to leave the battlefields of their death behind and to enter Óðinn's hall, Valhöll. They are chronicled by both *Grímnismál* and Snorri's *Gylfaginning*.<sup>378</sup> Expanding upon strophe forty-one of *Vafþrúðnismál*, Snorri says of the Einherjar:

Hvern dag þá er þeir hafa klæzk þá hevæða þeir sik ok ganga út í garðinn  
ok berjask ok fellr hverr á annan. Þat er leikr þeira. Ok er liðr at  
dögurðarmáli þá ríða þeir heim til Valhallar ok setjask til drykkju.

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<sup>376</sup> Davidson, *Scandinavian Cosmology*, p. 186.

<sup>377</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, p. 5.

<sup>378</sup> Strophes fourteen and thirty-six of *Grímnismál* make it seem as though Óðinn and Freyja choose among the dead, and the Valkyries only serve ale to the Einherjar.

Each day after they have got dressed they put on war-gear and go out into the courtyard and fight each other and they fall each upon the other. This is their sport. And when dinner-time approaches they ride back to Val-hall and sit down to drink.<sup>379</sup>

The poet of *Lokasenna* demonstrates what type of person is preferred to be a member of the Einherjar when Loki chides Óðinn for giving the ‘inóm slævorom’ or ‘faint hearted’ victory in battle, suggesting that Óðinn wanted only the true warriors to join him in his hall of death.<sup>380</sup> The Einherjar are only an indication of Lang’s fifth principle if one sees Óðinn’s selection of them as the unnatural cause of their death. Of perhaps more importance is the suggestion that for early Old Norse societies it was preferable to die in battle than to grow old and die from other causes. The Einherjar are treated quite well in Valhøllr. They are provided with ale by the Valkyries, and there is also an endless supply of cooked pork both of which suggest a lifestyle preferable to the day-to-day existence of ancient Norsemen where food may often have been scarce. Snorri, this time referencing strophe eighteen of *Grímnismál* tells us:

En aldri er svá mikill mannfjöldi í Valhøll at eigi má þeim endask flesk  
galtar þess er Sæhrímnir heitir. Hann er soðinn hvern dag ok heill at aptni.

But there will never be such a large number in Val-hall that the meat of the boar called Sæhrímnir will not be sufficient for them. It is cooked each day and whole again by evening.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 34 and *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 34.

<sup>380</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.100; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, pp. 88, 275. This makes sense in the context of the Ragnarøk battle that pits gods/men against the giants/monsters. Surely it would be prudent to have the best of the human warriors to fight in the battle, not those that are unskilled, and therefore killed easily.

<sup>381</sup> *Edda*, ed by Falkes, p. 32 and *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 32.

It is difficult to date the composition of *Grímnismál*, *Lokasenna* and *Vafþrúðnismál* but Snorri was definitely alive to experience food hardships because in the early thirteenth century, when he was just reaching middle age, Iceland went through a considerable famine.<sup>382</sup> If the preference to die in battle and not live to old age is not in itself an example of Lang's principle regarding unnatural death, it is perhaps a survival of a primitive state where life among the gods is to be preferred over life on earth. Yet, as Davidson argues, it must be noted that the possibility of joining the Einherjar was restricted to a small part of the society, the aristocratic warriors who followed Óðinn's cult.<sup>383</sup>

### **Satisfied Curiosity**

The final survival indicator, and one even more difficult to find in Old Norse literature, is that the savage mind is both curious but also easily satisfied. Similar once again to Tylor's idea of a reasoning child, Lang argued that savages desired to know about anything and everything. However they were often content with the first explanation they were given. For example, Lang cites, 'the arrival of the French missionaries among the Hurons was coincident with certain unfortunate events; therefore it was argued that the advent of the missionaries was the cause of the misfortune.'<sup>384</sup> Another example of this is, 'in the Pacific the people of one island always attribute hurricanes to the machination of the people of the nearest island to windward. The wind comes from them; therefore (as their medicine-men can notoriously influence the weather), they must have sent the wind.'<sup>385</sup> The simple

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<sup>382</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Middlesex: Harvill Press, 1993), p.161.

<sup>383</sup> Davidson, *Scandinavian Cosmology*, p. 187.

<sup>384</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 94-95.

<sup>385</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 96.

reasoning is that since the wind blows to island #1 from the direction of island #2, it must be that island #2 is the source of the wind.

One Norse example of this sort of idea comes from *Njáls saga* and the process of Iceland's conversion to Christianity which it describes. At one point, Óláfr Tryggvason sent a man named Þangbrandr to convert the people of Iceland to Christianity. Though he had some success, Þangbrandr was strongly resisted by many people. During one summer, his ship, the *Bison*, was wrecked off the east coast of Iceland. A woman named Steinunn explained to him:

It was Thor's giant-killing hammer  
That smashed the ocean-striding Bison;  
It was our gods who drove  
The bell-ringer's boat ashore.  
Your Christ could not save  
This buffalo of the sea from destruction;  
I do not think your God  
Kept guard over him at all.<sup>386</sup>

As Þórr was one of the main deities for the pagan Icelanders, it only made sense that he would be responsible for wrecking the ship of Þangbrandr who was trying to drive the people away from Þórr.

However, as revealed in the *Poetic Edda* material, the Old Norse system can appear to be the exact opposite of this principle of simple answers. Often there are long narratives or intricate details incorporated into the explanations of specific events. One example was the Norse understanding of earthquakes, as given by *Lokasenna* in the first chapter. At the very end of the poem, the gods tie up Loki with the entrails of one of his sons and it is said:

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<sup>386</sup> *Njal's Saga*, trans. by M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 221-222.



Skadi took a poisonous snake and fastened it over Loki's face; poison dripped down from it. Sigyn, Loki's wife, sat there and held a basin under the poison. But when the basin was full, she carried the poison out; and meanwhile the poison fell on Loki. Then he writhed so violently at this that all the earth shook from it; these are now called earthquakes.<sup>387</sup>

A simple conclusion could have been just that when Loki struggled against his bonds, he caused the earthquakes. However the poet adds a considerable amount of extra information with the poison and Sigyn's bowl-changing routine.<sup>388</sup> These elements significantly enhance the narrative, making it more memorable. And they are not parts of a quick, simple explanation, thereby suggesting that significant thought and reason went into their inclusion.

Consideration should also be given to the importance the Norse mythological system places on wisdom. For example, the character Óðinn is found in several sources either looking for or imparting wisdom. Snorri, expanding upon the twenty-eighth strophe of *Völuspá* in his *Gylfaginning*, explains that under the Yggdrasill tree there are roots:

that reaches towards the frost-giants, there is where Mimir's well is, which has wisdom and intelligence contained in it [...] All-father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get one until he placed his eye as a pledge.<sup>389</sup>

Óðinn was so obsessed with becoming knowledgeable that he was willing to sacrifice one of his eyes. *Völuspá* and the short *Baldur's Draumar* show Óðinn also willing to raise the dead in order to receive information. Both *Grímnismál* and

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<sup>387</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, pp. 95-96.

<sup>388</sup> Perhaps this is an example of an overzealous poet who is adding information to flesh out the narrative or a later interpolation by a third party. It could have been that the original narrative was very simple, but we have no evidence to suggest as much.

<sup>389</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 16.

*Hávamál* are examples of Óðinn imparting wisdom upon others, and *Vaffbrúðnismál* is an instance where he goes in search of a test of his wisdom. This tireless quest by one of, if not the primary character in Norse mythology seems in stark contradiction to Lang's principle of being easily intellectually satisfied.

### *Examining Vǫlospá*

Having established an outline of Lang's mythological principles, it remains to be determined how relevant they are in specific *Poetic Edda* material. The focus of this study will be on the enigmatic poem *Vǫlospá*. The benefit of using this poem is that it contains numerous aspects of the Old Norse mythological system even though it does not describe their origins in detail. An examination of *Vǫlospá* is useful therefore as a springboard to discuss specific aspects of the Old Norse system without having to analyze the entire *Poetic Edda*. For instance, if a strophe of *Vǫlospá* explains the creation of the world, we can also examine the specific strophes of other poems, such as *Vaffbrúðnismál*, that have similar or different explanations without having to examine all of *Vaffbrúðnismál*.<sup>390</sup> As with the consideration just undertaken of the principles highlighted above, this section will attempt to identify narratives from the savage states of other cultures that correspond to themes found in *Vǫlospá*, as well as to provide supporting material from other Old Norse works.

For example, following the death of Baldr, the *Vǫlospá* poet begins to describe the evils of the world. Of relevance to this examination of Lang is the end of the fortieth strophe.

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<sup>390</sup> It is certainly valid for contemporary scholars to disagree with this methodology, but Lang was a sampling scholar and did not take into consideration the whole story his excerpts came from. He rationalized this by saying, 'myth is so ancient, so complex, so full of elements, that it is vain labour to seek a cause for every phenomenon.' Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 8.

Austr sat in aldna í lárnvíði  
oc fœddi þar Fenris kindir;  
verðr af þeim ǫllom einna noccoorr  
tungls tiúgari í trollz hami.<sup>391</sup>

In the east sat an old woman in Iron-wood  
and nurtured there offspring of Fenrir;  
a certain one of them in monstrous form  
will be the snatcher of the moon.<sup>392</sup>

This strophe is significant because it contains striking parallels to other cultures' explanation of eclipses and other lunar phenomena. Similar to Tylor's *Vafþrúðnismál* explanation earlier, Lang identified, with reference to the scholarship of Grimm, that the general theme tends to be that a creature -- a giant among the Hindus, a wolf among the Norse, a dragon among the Chinese, and a demon for the Lithuanians -- is eating the celestial body, hence the change in its appearance.<sup>393</sup> References to natural phenomena are reminiscent of Müller's approach, but for Lang the primary interest is comparative cultures' similar mythic expressions rather than attempting to force all those expressions back to a single solar source.<sup>394</sup>

As is the case regarding *Skírnismál*, *Vǫlospá* is preserved in multiple versions. Along with *Alvíssmál*, *Skírnismál* and *Lokasenna*, *Vǫlospá* is contained within the Codex Regius manuscript; it is the first poem, followed by *Hávamál*. A version of it is also found in the *Hauksbók* and twenty-eight strophes are quoted by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*. As stated above, the Codex Regius is thought to have been composed around the 1270s; the *Hauksbók* composition is estimated to have

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<sup>391</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.9.

<sup>392</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 9.

<sup>393</sup> Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. by Stallybrass, II, pp. 706-707; Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 133. See page 106.

<sup>394</sup> Note that Lang never objected to the principle of solar myths; he would readily admit their existence. What he objected to was Müller's idea that almost all myths were solar. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 135.

occurred in the first decade of the fourteenth century; and Snorri's *Prose Edda*, which contains *Gylfaginning*, is believed to have been written around the year 1220, although the only sources now in existence were not composed until the 1300s or later.<sup>395</sup>

Unlike *Skírnismál* and *Lokasenna* which had a general narrative plot, the structure of *Völuspá* makes the progression of themes quite difficult to follow. It does not contain any explanatory prose and the poet assumed that his audience was knowledgeable about a wide variety of Old Norse mythological topics and rarely spent more than a single strophe to illuminate any subject. Because of this style, in trying to make the *Völuspá* intelligible to an audience now removed from the poet's original setting, a number of contested interpretations have arisen among modern commentators and translators. Many modern interpretations of the *Völuspá* also rely on the prose expansion of the poem contained in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* to inform their explanations.

### **The Narrator**

The existence of some of Lang's principles among the Norse is evidenced at the very beginning of this poem. The primary speaker of the poem is a *völva*, or prophetess, who refers to Óðinn as 'Valföðr' (father of the slain), and systematically retells the history of the world and the future she sees still to come. The use of this specific name for Óðinn, especially when coupled with later references, suggests that

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<sup>395</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, II, p. 61; Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 351. As for the origin of the poem, there is considerable debate. Wolfgang Butt, 'Zur Herkunft der *Völuspá*', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 91 (1969), pp. 82-103 believes it originated in the Danelaw of England; whereas Robert Höckert, 'Völuspá och Vanakrigit', in *Festskrift tillägnad Vitalis Norström på 60-årsdagen den 29 Januari 1916* (Gothenburg: Wettergren and Kerber, 1916), pp. 293-309 argues for a Swedish origin; and Bertha Phillpotts, 'Surt', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 21 (1905), pp. 14-30 held that the character Surt was a volcano deity and therefore the poem was Icelandic in origin.

the *vǫlva* is already dead and that Óðinn has re-animated her in order to retrieve information from her.<sup>396</sup>

At the end of the second strophe, when she speaks of primordial existence, the *vǫlva* says,

Ec man iotna, ár um borna,  
þá er forðom mic fœdda hǫfðo;  
nío man ec heima, nío íviði,  
miqtvið mæran, fyr mold neðan.<sup>397</sup>

I remember giants  
born early in time,  
who long ago  
had reared me.  
Nine worlds I remember,  
nine wood-ogresses,  
glorious tree of good measure,  
under the ground.<sup>398</sup>

While *Vǫlospá* places a fair amount of emphasis on trees, it is particularly significant how they are described in this particular strophe. Following the arguments made by Dronke, the ‘miqtvið mæran’ is possibly an allusion to Yggdrasill, an element of the Old Norse cosmography that will receive considerable attention throughout the rest of this essay. Briefly summarized, Yggdrasill was a tree at the center of the Old

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<sup>396</sup> For a counter argument that the *vǫlva* was not explicitly summoned or raised from the grave by Óðinn and instead should be understood as being on equal terms with him, see Judy Quinn, 'Dialogue with a *völva*: *Hyndluljóð*, *Baldur's draumar* and *Völuspá*', in *The Poetic Edda. Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 261.

<sup>397</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.1.

<sup>398</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, p.7.

Norse world. It supported the various territories of Æsir, frost giants and Niflheimr and housed a variety of creatures, some of whom are consistently damaging it.<sup>399</sup>

This strophe is the first of three sections of *Vǫlospá* that chart the origin and life of this specific Norse tree, and ultimately herald its death. The mortality of Yggdrasill is of vital importance to the *Vǫlospá* poet and therefore any Langian interpretation, but it is the origin of the tree that we learn about in this second strophe. Its progenitors, the *vǫlva* tells Óðinn, are the ‘nío íviðjur’ who reside under the ground, a fitting location as the seed a tree sprouts from also only germinates under the ground. Dronke argue that these ‘íviðjur’ are wood-ogresses that should be understood as the figurative roots of what will become Yggdrasill. Referring to the tree specifically as ‘miqtvið’ also carries specific implications. Dronke argues, in another context, that the calculating, measuring and finite implications of the term ‘miqt’ suggest that the ‘viðr’, which she feels can be none other than Yggdrasill, must also have an end.<sup>400</sup> Subsequent references that we shall examine in *Vǫlospá* will corroborate this connection to mortality by linking Yggdrasill to mortal humans, and identifying the tree with the fate of the Norse cosmos, at least according to Dronke. This may be the poet’s way of demonstrating Norse totemism and the worship of trees.

Another element that is apparent from the outset of the poem is the style in which the poet has the *vǫlva* speak. The second strophe begins, ‘Ek man’, or ‘I remember’. Unlike the three poems examined in the previous chapter or the Tylor section above regarding *Vafþrúðnismál*, this poem has one consistent speaker.

However, the *vǫlva* on occasion speaks in the third person and switches tenses when

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<sup>399</sup> For a summary of the Yggdrasill tree, see Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, pp. 375-376. For an argument that the tree theme could only have come from Denmark, see Axel Olrik, ‘Yggdrasil’, *Danske studier*, 14 (1917), pp.49-52.

<sup>400</sup> Her initial argument concerning ‘miqt’ is based off of strophe 60 of *Hávamál* and then applied to *Vǫlospá*. *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, pp. 31-32.

speaking of the past and prophesizing future events. Occasionally, the poet replaces the pronoun ‘ek’ meaning ‘I’ with ‘hón’ or ‘she’. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson argued that this literary technique derived from the actions of *völur* that the poet would actually have been familiar with in his lifetime.

Það er alkunna að miðlar í dái tala um sjálfa sig í þriðju persónu, sama gerist við persónuklofning. Þvílík fyrirbrigði hefur skáldið þekkt frá völlum samtímans, og þaðan er það komið í kvæði hans.

It is well known that mediums in trance speak of themselves in the third person; the same happens in the case of the “split personality”. The poet has known such phenomena from the *völur* of his own time, and from there it has come into his poem.<sup>401</sup>

Dronke goes further than Einar Ólafur, arguing that the ‘hón’ pronoun actually refers to a separate *völva* who is relating information to the primary, ‘ek’-speaking *völva*.<sup>402</sup> Dronke does not offer sufficient evidence in support of her conclusion, yet one cannot deny that the part of her argument that says the *Völuspá* poet ‘could, had he wished, have composed *Völuspá* with a single *völva*-figure’, using ‘ek’ throughout the entire poem.<sup>403</sup> It is therefore only reasonable to accept that the poet made a conscious decision to differentiate between ‘ek’ and ‘hón’. Sveinsson’s argument, that this literary distinction has its roots in actual Nordic magic practices, would be the most convincing for Lang, since it suggests how real-world practice might be incorporated into recorded mythology.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld (n.p.: Allmenna bókafélagið, 1962), p. 324 in *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, p. 28.

<sup>402</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, pp. 27-30.

<sup>403</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, p. 30.

<sup>404</sup> Others however, see Christian influences working on the prophetess, such as a similarity to the sibyls of the Middle Ages. See Sophus Bugge, *The Home of the Eddic Poems*, trans. by William Henry Schofield (London: Nutt, 1899), p. xxix.

## Cosmography

Having described the narrator's first observations, the *Völuspá* poet continues the poem by relating the beginning of all things. As noted above, the poet moves through topics quickly so it is not surprising that the creation of the world occupies only two strophes. Much of this has been examined above in the section on Tylor's disembodied cosmography and thus does not need to be repeated verbatim here,<sup>405</sup> but there are several related points from the different creation narratives of *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and Snorri's *Gylfaginning* that do need to be addressed alongside *Völuspá* as these related points can link the Norse system to other savage cultures which Lang's scholarship identified.

The first point is the inclusion of the cow, Auðhumla, in *Gylfaginning*. Though it is unlikely that Snorri would have been aware of such a tale from some other, remote culture, the idea of human beings originating via the actions of a cow is not unique to the Norse as Lang makes reference to the African Zulus who tell a similar story in which the first man was belched up by a cow.<sup>406</sup> The next point concerns when Ymir, the giant whose body was used to form the constituent parts of the earth, was killed. Snorri says, 'en er hann fell, þá hljóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum hans at með því drektu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komsk undan með sínu hýski,' or 'and when he fell, so much blood flowed from his wounds that with it they drowned all the race of frost-giants, except that one escaped with his household.'<sup>407</sup> A flood or deluge myth is a common thread amongst many ancient societies

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<sup>405</sup> See page 117.

<sup>406</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 174.

<sup>407</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 11; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 11.



worldwide.<sup>408</sup> As a Christian, Snorri surely knew of the Old Testament story of Noah, but there are also examples from the Ovaherero of Africa, from Peru in South America, and the Thlinkets in North America cited by Lang.<sup>409</sup> Here in the case of the flood, the parallels to other cultures are easy to see, but remember that the Nordic source for the flood is not from *Vǫlospá*. As seen in the Tylor section, *Vǫlospá* does not contain a creation narrative based entirely around Ymir, and in fact, the explanation that is offered can be problematic.

The key is the phrase ‘bioðom um ypðo’ or ‘brought up the earth’ that comes in the fourth strophe.<sup>410</sup> Out of what did Burr’s sons lift the seashores? The sea would be a natural assumption because, as Lang will show, there is a tendency for savage peoples to explain the origin of land as coming out of the sea. But the poet uses valuable space, which he appears to place at a premium given the lack of exposition on many topics, in the previous third strophe telling his audience that there was no sea when the earth was brought up. Thus in trying to understand the Norse viewpoint, it is tempting to favour the ‘assembly of the world from Ymir’s body’ narrative instead and consider *Vǫlospá* to be suffering from narrative corruption. Yet, regardless of which version one prefers, there are savage traces in both theories. Consider the creation myth of the North American Huron tribe provided by Lang:

They recognise as the founder of their kindred a woman named Ataentsic, who, like Hephæstus in the *Iliad*, was banished from the sky...she cut down a heaven-tree, and fell with the fall of this Huron *Ygdrasil* ... she dropped on the back of the turtle in the midst of the waters. He consulted the other

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<sup>408</sup> For an argument that Snorri misunderstood his sources for this story, see Anne Holtsmark, ‘Det norrøne ordet lúðr’, *Maal og minne* (1946), pp. 49-65.

<sup>409</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 171, 201; II, p. 75.

<sup>410</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.1.

aquatic animals, and one of them, generally said to have been the musk-rat, fished up some soil and fashioned the earth. Here Ataentsic gave birth to twins, Ioskeha and Tawiscara...even before birth one of them betrayed his restless and evil nature by refusing to be born in the usual manner, but insisting on breaking through his parent's side or arm-pit. He did so, but it cost his mother her life. Her body was buried, and from it sprang the various vegetable productions, pumpkins, maize, beans, and so forth.<sup>411</sup>

There are numerous parallels in the Huron myth to both Nordic creation stories: first is the identification of a sacred tree (although it was Lang, not the Hurons, who called it a kind of Yggdrasill); second is the earth being raised up out of water; third is the birth of offspring from abnormal parts of the body; and fourth is the death of the central creation figure and the use of the creator's body to further develop the natural world.<sup>412</sup>

### **Human Origins & Tree Totemism**

Once the world is created, the next question concerns how it was peopled. An explanation of the creation of humanity offers one of the best applications of Lang's theories and also ties in some aspects of Tylor's analysis. Since most early societies have theories concerning how human beings came to exist, as did the Old Norse, both Lang and Tylor thought it possible to extrapolate from those stories what their early stages of society might have looked like.

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<sup>411</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 176-177.

<sup>412</sup> The Taculies of British Columbia have a similar story to the Hurons. According to them, in the beginning there was only water and a musk-rat. When the musk-rat would dive to the bottom of the water, searching for food, his mouth would fill with mud. When he returned to the water surface and spat the mud out, it gradually formed the earth. Also, the New Zealand Manganians have a god Vatea who married a woman called Papa. When their children were born, one came out of Pap's head and the other from her armpit. Finally, the northern Canadian Tinnehs tell a story of their progenitor dog who could assume the shape of a man. He was torn into pieces by a giant and those pieces that landed in the rivers became fish and those thrown into the sky became birds. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 184-185, 187-188.

Starting in strophe seventeen and continuing into eighteen of *Vǫluspá*, the poet introduces the first two creatures, Ask and Embla, and the process of their animation by the gods:

Unz þrír kvómo ór því liði  
qflgir ok ástgir, æsir, at húsi;  
fundo á landi, lítt megandi,  
Ask oc Emblo orløglausa.

Until three gods, strong and loving,  
came from that company to the world;  
they found on land Ash and Embla,  
capable of little, lacking in fate.

Qnd þau ne áttu, óð þau ne hofðu,  
lá né læti né lito góða;  
qnd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hæmir,  
lá gaf Lóðurr ok lito góða.

Breath they had not, spirit they had not,  
character nor vital spark nor fresh complexions,  
breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hæmir,  
vital spark gave Lodur, and fresh complexions.<sup>413</sup>

It is interesting to note that the strophe that follows also contains the noun ‘Ask’ but this time in a reference to the tree Yggdrasill and not to the first human life form.

Ask veit ek standa, heitir Yggdrasill,  
hár baðmr, ausinn hvíta auri;  
þaðan koma döggar, þær í dala falla,

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<sup>413</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 4-5; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 6.

stendr æ yfir, grœnn Urðar brunni.<sup>414</sup>

I know that an ash-tree stands called Yggdrasill,  
a high tree, soaked with shining loam;  
from there come the dews which fall in the valley,  
ever green, it stands over the well of fate.<sup>415</sup>

This strophe provides the second stage of the Yggdrasill growth-progression. In strophe two, the tree was just in its germination phase, underground. Midway through the poem, the tree is now in full green growth. Also noteworthy is the fact the poet is linking the creation of the Ask character very closely with the Ask tree. It should be said that even though the *Völuspá* poet does not explicitly draw a connection between the pairs Ask and Embla and man and woman, one must assume, as did Snorri, that these two characters are meant to be understood as the progenitors of the mortal human race.<sup>416</sup>

Connections between man and tree go beyond the simple use of a structural device for the poet. Following the Yggdrasill strophe, the *völva* introduces ‘Urðr’, ‘Verðandi’ and ‘Skuld’ who are ‘ór þeim sæ, er und þolli stendr [...] þær lög lögðo, þær líf kuro alda bornom, ørlög seggia’ or ‘from the lake which stands under the tree [...] they set down laws, they chose lives for the sons of men the fates of men.’<sup>417</sup>

This not only develops the concepts of societal organization and how man functions within that dynamic, but it also shows that all of it is tied to the Yggdrasill. The poet is tracing the growth and destiny of the Yggdrasill tree and mortal man along parallel

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<sup>414</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 5.

<sup>415</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 6.

<sup>416</sup> The Embla figure is not given nearly as much attention and significance as Ask. Her name is thought to be a parallel to the Greek *ámpelos*, meaning ‘wine’, so still a vegetation symbol, but we cannot tie her to other symbols as we can with Ask. For an argument that the two names Ask and Embla were the result of a fire preparation ritual, rubbing ash and wine wood together, see Hans Sperber, ‘Embla’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 36 (1910), pp. 220.

<sup>417</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 5; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 6.

lines. Before this point in the poem, all the audience knew of the tree was its germination underground. Now, after the gods have fully developed man, the poet shows the Yggdrasill in full splendour.

Snorri builds considerably on these passages in his *Gylfaginning*. He not only makes explicit the identification of Ask and Embla as the first man and woman, but also clearly states that they were made from driftwood. In other words, their material essence came from a tree.

Þá er þeir Bors synir gengu með sævar ströndu, fundu þeir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok stöpuðu af menn. Gaf hinn fyrsti önd ok líf, annarr vit ok hrœring, þriðji ásjónu, málit ok heyrn ok sjón; gafu þeim klæði ok nafn. Hét karlmaðrinn Ask, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er byggðin var gefin undir Miðgarði.

As Bor's sons walked along the sea shore, they came across two logs and created people out of them. The first gave breath and life, the second consciousness and movement, the third a face, speech and hearing and sight; they gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ask, the woman Embla, and from them were produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place Midgard was given.<sup>418</sup>

Both the *Völuspá* original and Snorri's expansion are remarkably similar to the story of man's creation offered by the Boonoorong tribe of southern Australia, with the exception of the material from which man is made:

Pund-jel made two clay images of men, and danced round them. He made their hair—one had straight, one had curly—of bark. He danced round them. He lay on them, and breathed his breath into their mouths, noses

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<sup>418</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 13, and trans. by Faulkes, p. 13.

and navels, and danced round them. Then they arose full-grown young men.<sup>419</sup>

If the central idea is that mortal man is incomplete without the breath of a god to enliven him, similar to Óðinn's gift, there is also the idea that man is made of important natural elements. For Australians, that important element was clay, or earth, with tree bark as merely a source for one discrete human feature. But for the Norse, the tree was man's core.<sup>420</sup> The Ovaherero tribe in Hereraland can be seen as even closer to Old Norse society because, as Lang observed, they 'have a kind of tree *Ygdrasil*, a tree out of which men are born [...] out of it came, in the beginning, the first man and woman. Oxen stepped forth from it too.'<sup>421</sup> Not only does the Ovaherero tree produce human beings but also the animals that help humans to survive.

Based on the description of the Yggdrasill tree given between strophes twenty-nine and thirty-five of *Grimnismál*, Snorri says:

The ash is of all trees the biggest and best. Its branches spread out over all the world and extend across the sky. Three of the tree's roots support it and extend very very far. One is among the Æsir, the second among the frost-giants, where Ginnungagap once was. The third extends over Niflheim, and under that root is Hvergelmir, and Nidhogg gnaws the bottom of the root. But under the root that reaches towards the frost-giants, there is where Mimir's well is, which has wisdom and intelligence contained in it, and the master of the well is called Mimir. He is full of learning because he drinks of the well from the horn Giallarhorn. All-father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get one until he placed his eye as a

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<sup>419</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 165-166.

<sup>420</sup> Lang also gives an evolutionary example from the Inca people where man is made unsuccessfully several times, first out of clay and then out of wood, before the gods settle on the successful combination of yellow and white maize. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, pp. 190-191.

<sup>421</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, I, p. 171. Note that once again it is Lang who identifies the tree as a Yggdrasill parallel, not the Ovaherero tribe.

pledge [...] The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weird's well [...] There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Weird, Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns [...] There is an eagle sits in the branches of the ash, and it has knowledge of many things, and between its eyes sits a hawk called Vedrfolnir. A squirrel called Ratatosk runs up and down through the ash and carries malicious messages between the eagle and Nidhogg. Four stags run in the branches of the ash and feed on the foliage. Their names are: Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr, Durathror. And there are so many snakes in Hvergelmir with Nidhogg that no tongue can enumerate them.<sup>422</sup>

In these *Gylfaginning* passages, Snorri references much of *Völuspá* and once again expands upon those references. He also adds a considerable number of references to animals. Indisputably the ash tree was of special significance to the ancient Norse as evidenced by its links to both their paterfamilias figure and world tree. This is the most compelling evidence of totemism among the Norse that has been seen so far. But while Norse society clearly placed importance on the Yggdrasill, and by extension the ash tree, there is no explicit evidence of tree worship that would befit a proper totem, at least not in *Völuspá*.

What others saw in Norse society might have been a little different. Turning back to Adam of Bremen, in addition to the idol worship seen earlier,<sup>423</sup> there is a description of the central role a tree played in pagan worship at the Swedish king's court at Uppsala:

Near that temple is a very large tree with widespread branches which are always green both in winter and summer. What kind of tree it is nobody knows. There is also a spring there where the pagans are accustomed to

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<sup>422</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 17-19.

<sup>423</sup> See page 138.

perform sacrifices and to immerse a human being alive. As long as his body is not found, the request of the people will be fulfilled.<sup>424</sup>

This brutal imagery associated with paganism and trees is reinforced by the thirteenth-century *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* that tells what occurred after Svein became king of the Swedes:

Var þá fram leitt hross eitt á þingit ok hoggvit í sundr ok skipt til áts, en roðit blóðinu blotter. Kǫstuðu þá allir Svíar kristni, ok hófusk blot.

A horse was then brought to the assembly and hewn in pieces and cut up for eating, and the sacred tree was smeared with blood. Then all the Swedes abandoned Christianity, and sacrifices started again.<sup>425</sup>

These citations not only reinforce the evidence presented previously that ritual trees were part of early Norse society but also that there were bloody practices that accompanied their use. Considering the initial definition of totemism as animals or plants being deified and turned into symbols of society, as provided by Lubbock at the very beginning of this chapter, at this point it can be said there is substantial evidence of tree worship among the early Norse.

### **Magic**

Following the discussion of the Norns, the *Völuspá* poet continues to provide Norse examples of magic. Such clear familiarity with the topic provides more insinuation that the poet was acquainted with prophetesses at the time of composition. Two examples follow, first regarding Gullveig and then Heiðr:

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<sup>424</sup> *Adam of Bremen*, trans. by Tschan, pp. 207-208.

<sup>425</sup> *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and trans. Tolkein, p. 63.



Þat man hón fólkvíg fyrst í heimi,  
er Gullveigogeirum studdo  
oc í hǫll Hárs hána brendo;  
þrysvar brendo þrysvar borna,  
opt, ósialdan, þó hón enn lifir.

She remembers the first war in the world,  
when they buttressed Gullveig with spears  
and in One-eye's hall they burned her;  
three times they burned her, three times she was reborn,  
over and over, yet she lives still.

Heiði hana héto, hvars til húsa kom,  
vǫlo velspá, vitti hon ganda;  
Seiðr hon, hvars hon kunni, seiðr hón hug leikinn,  
æ var hon angan illrar brúðar.

Bright One they called her, wherever she came to houses,  
the seer with pleasing prophecies, she charmed them with spells  
she made magic wherever she could, with magic she played with minds,  
she was always the favourite of wicked women.<sup>426</sup>

There are a number of significant implications in these descriptions of magic in the poem. First note that these strophes are an example of Sveinsson's argument concerning Norse vǫlvur speaking in the third person. More importantly, magic is seen to work in a number of different ways. In the first example, Gullveig uses magic to defy death, three times.<sup>427</sup> In the second example, the prophetess Heiðr,

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<sup>426</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 5-6; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, pp. 6-7.

<sup>427</sup> Scholarly opinions on Gullveig can be quite diverse. De Vries believed that she was simply a creation of the poet, Jan de Vries, 'Vǫluspá Str. 21 und 22', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 77 (1962), pp. 42-47. Whereas Fischer believed her burning was symbolic of a gold purification ritual: Rudolf W. Fischer, 'Gullveigs Wandlung: Versuch einer läutender Deutung des Kultes in Hars Halle', *Antaios*, 4 (1963), pp. 581-596.

who some scholars, such as Simek, believe was simply a renamed Gullveig,<sup>428</sup> practised the type of magic called *seiðr*. She could forecast the future, cast spells, and ‘played’ with peoples’ minds, presumably making them think what she wanted them to think. All this activity made her a favourite among evil women.

Though there are many concepts in the Old Norse mythological system that are difficult to wholly understand, *seiðr* is especially complicated. That it is to be understood as a form of magic is essentially agreed upon, but there is little consensus on the details of what that magic entailed.<sup>429</sup> Here in *Völuspá* there is a woman using *seiðr* as a method of prophecy. In the *Lokasenna* section quoted above, Óðinn was chastised for practising *seiðr* because it was thought unmanly.<sup>430</sup> Whatever might be the appropriate gender for practicing the art of *seiðr*, two of its characteristics are provided in the *Lokasenna* strophe. Drums are used as an accessory to *seiðr* and though the poet of *Lokasenna* does not say for what purpose Óðinn used his *seiðr*, Loki does state that it was done or learned on the island of Samsø (Sámseyo).<sup>431</sup>

In the twenty-eighth strophe, the *völva* and Óðinn begin to quarrel. Through this exchange, even more can possibly be learned about how one was expected to interact with Norse prophetesses:

Ein sat hón úti, þá er inn aldni kom,  
Yggiungr ása, oc í augo leit:  
‘Hvers fregnit mic, hví freistið mín?’

<sup>428</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, p.123. This is not a widely accepted position.

<sup>429</sup> The bar for *seið* scholarship was set in the 1930s by Dag Strömbäck, ‘Sejd: Textstudier I nordisk religionshistoria’, *Nordiska texter och undersökningar*, 5 (Stockholm: H. Geber, 1935), see pp.17-31 for references to the Eddic material specifically. For a comparison with other northern cultures and focus on the character of Óðinn specifically, see Åke Ohlmarks, ‘Arktischer Schamanismus und altnordischer seiðr’, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 36 (1939), pp. 171-80. Also see page 318 on Neil Price in the conclusion of this study for an example of current scholarship.

<sup>430</sup> See page 137.

<sup>431</sup> This island is located off the north coast of the Fyn region of Denmark.

alt veit ec, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt:  
í inom mæra Mímis brunni.’  
Dreccr mið Mímir morgin hverian  
af veði Valfðors – vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

Alone she sat outside, when the old man came,  
the Terrible One of the Æsir and he looked in her eyes:  
‘Why do you question me? Why do you test me?  
I know everything, Odin, where you hid your eye  
in the famous well of Mimir.’  
Mimir drinks mead every morning  
from Father of the Slain’s wager—do you understand yet, or what more?

Valði henni Herfðör hringa oc men.  
Fecc spioll spaclig oc spáganda;  
sá hón vítt oc um vítt of verold hveria.

War Sire chose for her  
rings and necklaces.  
He got wise news  
and spirits of prophecy.  
She saw far, and far beyond—  
over every world.<sup>432</sup>

After challenging her, and being put in his place by the all knowing *vǫlva*, Óðinn appeases her with gifts, and in return she shared with him ‘wise news’ and ‘prophecy’.<sup>433</sup> The ceremony we also learn is conducted outdoors, perhaps so she can see ‘far, and far beyond’.

In the spirit of Lang, these sections have demonstrated that within *Vǫluspá* there are minute examples of Nordic society. These examples are surely far from

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<sup>432</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 7; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, pp. 7-8.

<sup>433</sup> It is here, given the switch to the third person ‘hón’, that Dronke argues for a second *vǫlva* entering the poem. It is to this second *vǫlva* that Óðinn is giving bribes, not the primary speaker, ‘ek’, we have had so far. *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, pp. 27-30.

definitive but do suggest possible codes of etiquette for interacting with a Nordic prophetess.

### **Baldr Narrative**

Beginning in the thirty-first strophe, the *vǫlva* begins to relate the sequence of events involving Baldr and his death. The following strophes will serve as a springboard for further exploration into the ability of Óðinn to manipulate the dead, and begin to provide suggestions as to how specific vegetation might have been important to the Norse.

Ek sá Baldri, blóðgom tívur,  
Óðins barni, ørlög fólgin:  
stóð um vaxinn, vǫllom hæri,  
miór ok miðk fagr, mistilteinn.

I saw for Baldr for the bloody god,  
Odin's child, his fate concealed;  
there stood grown—higher than the plain,  
slender and very fair—the mistletoe.

Varð af þeim meiði, er mér sýndiz,  
harmflaug hættlig: Hǫðr nam skióta;  
Baldrs bróðir var of borinn snemma,  
sá nam, Óðins sonr, einnættr vega.

From that plant which seemed so lovely  
came a dangerous, harmful dart, Hod began to shoot;  
Baldr's brother was born very quickly;  
Odin's son began fighting at one night old.

Þó hann æva hendr né hǫfuð kembði,  
áðr á bál um bar Baldrs andskota;

en Frigg um grét í Fensqlom  
vá Valhallar.

Nor did he ever wash his hands nor comb his hair,  
until he brought Baldr's adversary to the funeral pyre;  
and in Fen-halls Frigg wept for the woe of Valhall.<sup>434</sup>

Unlike some of the other details in *Völuspá*, for which there may be no or only a single corroborating source, the circumstances leading to Baldr's death are quite well documented. As such, though the excerpt from *Völuspá* is brief, it is not refuted by other sources, unlike what was seen regarding the world's creation narrative. Baldr's story actually forms the framework for a second *Poetic Edda* encounter between Óðinn and a *völva*, recounted in *Baldrs Draumar*, one of the shortest Eddic poems and contained only in the manuscript AM 748 | 4to. Within *Baldrs Draumar*, some of the best examples of Lang's principles can be found.

The poem begins with Baldr having troubling dreams which causes Óðinn, after taking counsel from the other gods, to ride off to hell to find more information. As in the overview of Lang's principles above, the poet specifically calls Óðinn 'galdrs fǫður' or 'father of magic' in the third strophe. In the fourth strophe the poet continues:

Þa reið Óðinn fyr austan dyrr,  
þar er hann vissi vǫlo leiði;  
nam hann vitugri valgaldr kveða,  
unz nauðig reis, nás orð um kvað:

Then Odin rode by the eastern doors,  
where he knew the seeress's grave to be;

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<sup>434</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 7-8; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 8.

he began to speak a corpse-reviving spell for the wise woman,  
until reluctantly she rose, spoke these corpse-words:<sup>435</sup>

This is an explicit example of Óðinn's ability to raise the dead, compelling the prophetess to speak to him. Óðinn boasts about this event in the hundred and fifty-seventh strophe of *Hávamál*, providing further proof of the importance of what happened in *Baldrs Draumar*. Notice the dead do not give up their secrets willingly. The *völva* must be forced to talk; at the end of three of her utterances the *völva* voices the refrain, 'nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegia' or 'reluctantly I told you, now I'll be silent.'<sup>436</sup> What follows is essentially an expansion on the series of events described in *Völuspá*. Hodr is named as Baldr's killer, but there is no mention of the mistletoe. The unnamed avenging son from *Völuspá* is revealed to be the character Vali, and as was the case in *Völuspá*, there is no mention of Loki having a role in Baldr's death. His only appearance comes in the final strophe where the poet makes reference to Loki slipping his bonds, suggesting that the poet was aware of the part Loki was eventually to play in Ragnarøk.

Snorri once again provides greater description of these events in his *Gylfaginning*. In a manner similar to the *Völuspá* poet, Snorri characterises Baldr's death as the catalyst for Ragnarøk, something that is not surprising since he cites the poem specifically. As before, Snorri draws on the *Poetic Edda* works for the main points of his narrative; however, he also adds a considerable amount of information for which he is the only source. Although some of this extra information serves only to produce a smooth narrative, the parts specific to the actual cause of Baldr's death are useful to this study of Lang because the details Snorri adds are examples of Lang's principles.

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<sup>435</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.273; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 243.

<sup>436</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 274; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 244.

Snorri's recounting of the events regarding Baldr begins, similar to *Baldrs draumar*, with his troubling dreams. But instead of using Óðinn as the character who seeks further information about these dreams, Snorri's version refers to Frigg who,

tók swardaga til þess at eira skyldu Baldri eldr ok vatn, járn ok alls konar málmr, steinar, jörðin, viðirnir, sóttirnar, dýrin, fuglarnir, eitr, ormar [...] En er þetta sá Loki Laufeyjarson þá líkaði honum illa er Baldr sakaði ekki. Hann gekk til Fensalar til Friggjar ok brá sér í kónu líki.<sup>437</sup>

received solemn promises so that Baldr should not be harmed by fire and water, iron and all kinds of metal, stones, the earth, trees, diseases, the animals, the birds, poison, snakes [...] But when Loki Laufeyjarson saw this he was not pleased that Baldr was unharmed. He went to Fensalir to Frigg and changed his appearance to that of a woman.<sup>438</sup>

Because Baldr is now seemingly invulnerable, the Æsir make a game of trying to harm him with all sorts of weapons, to no effect. Having assumed the shape of a woman, Loki learns about the pledges and then asks Frigg if there is anything that has not sworn an oath not to harm Baldr.

Þá svarar Frigg: “Vex viðarteinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhøll. Sá er mistilteinn kallaðr. Sá þótti mér ungr at krefja eiðsins.” Því næst hvarf konan á brut. En Loki tók mistiltein ok sleit upp ok gekk til þings.<sup>439</sup>

Then Frigg replied: “There grows a shoot of a tree to the west of Val-hall. It is called mistletoe. It seemed young to me to demand the oath from.” Straight

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<sup>437</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 45

<sup>438</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 48.

<sup>439</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 45

away the woman disappeared. And Loki took mistletoe and plucked it and went to the assembly.<sup>440</sup>

Upon returning to where the Æsir were playing their game with Baldr, Loki finds the blind Høðr. He was the only individual not taking part in the game because he has no weapons and could not see to use them in any event.

Pá mælir Loki: “Gerðu þó í liking annarra manna ok veit Baldri sæmð sem aðrir menn. Ek mun visa þér til hvar hann stendr. Skjót at honum vendi þessum.” Høðr tók mistiltein ok skaut at Baldri at tilvísun Loka. Flaug skotit í gögnum hann ok fell hann dauðr til jarðar, ok hefir þat mest óhapp verity unit með goðum ok mönnum.<sup>441</sup>

Then said Loki: “Follow other people’s example and do Baldr honour like other people. I will direct you to where he is standing. Shoot at him this stick.” Hod took the mistletoe and shot at Baldr at Loki’s direction. The missile flew through him and he fell dead to the ground, and this was the unluckiest deed ever done among gods and men.<sup>442</sup>

After his death, the Æsir send Hermóðr to Hel, the goddess of the dead, in order to bring Baldr back from the dead. Hel says that she will allow Baldr to return to the Æsir if, ‘ok ef allir hlutir í heiminum, kykvir ok dauðir, gráta hann’ or ‘and if all things in the world, alive and dead, weep for him.’ This correlates with *Völuspá* strophe 33 where Frigg is weeping. The Æsir sent messages all over the world to request the weeping, but one giantess named Þökk refused to weep and ‘en þess geta menn at þar hafi verity Loki Laufeyjarson er flest hefir illt gert með Ásum’, or ‘it is

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<sup>440</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 48.

<sup>441</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 46

<sup>442</sup> *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 48-49.



presumed that this was Loki Laufeyiarson, who has done most evil among the Æsir'.<sup>443</sup>

Several details in this story stand out. First is the sport the Æsir are making with Baldr. Only Snorri characterizes the lethal action as unintentional, that Høðr himself did not mean to cause the death of Baldr. If one reads only *Völuspá* and *Baldur's Draumar*, one could reasonably assume that Høðr deliberately killed Baldr, whereas in Snorri's narrative Høðr is just a pawn in Loki's plans. The second important detail is that Snorri presents the death of Baldr as entirely of Loki's making, though Høðr still makes the fatal blow, a detail missing in both *Völuspá* and *Baldur's Draumar*.<sup>444</sup> Third, Lang's principles of savage magic are evident: Loki employs gender altering metamorphosis twice in the story, once to become a woman to learn Frigg's methods, and again to become a giantess to prevent Baldr's return. Finally, if one views Hel's agreement that if everything wept for Baldr she would return him from death as an instance of a cultural survival, then weeping or remorse are revealed as an integral part of any death and burial.<sup>445</sup>

The idea that Snorri took it upon himself to craft the character Loki as the main cause of Baldr's death is given more credence by examining the twelfth century Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus. Writing in his *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo tells the story of the demigod Balderus and his rival Høtherus who were both suitors of the woman Nanna. Balderus was invulnerable to steel and therefore common swords could not hurt him. However Høtherus obtained the magical sword 'mistletoe' from the satyr Miming, and with this he was able to fatally wound

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<sup>443</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 46-48; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, pp. 50-51.

<sup>444</sup> Mogk argued in one very short article that Snorri used Loki as purely a narrative tool and that he originally had no part in Baldr's death. Eugen Mogk, 'Lokis Anteil an Baldurs Tode', *FF communications*, 57 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1924).

<sup>445</sup> For an English summary of Bugge's argument that weeping could not have been a part of the Old Norse burial practices before 800 AD and should be understood as a Christian loan, see George Stephens, *Studies on Northern Mythology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1883), pp. 51-52.

Balderus.<sup>446</sup> While Saxo has turned the myth of Baldr into more of a legend (where human beings, not gods, are the main characters), he has adapted most of the elements found in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs Draumar*, but significantly Loki is absent from the series of events. This could suggest that Snorri's adaptation was his own creation and not representative of the Norse culture in existence at the time of composition of *Völuspá* or *Baldrs Draumar*, whenever that might have been.

As for the mistletoe, although it figures in both *Gylfaginning* and *Völuspá*, and in an altered form according to Saxo, it does not appear in *Baldrs Draumar*. In *Völuspá* the poet describes the mistletoe as being a 'harmflaug hættlig' interpreted as a 'dangerous, harmful dart' by Larrington, suggesting only something that is meant to fly through the air. Snorri however chooses to call it a 'vǫndr' or 'stick' according to Faulkes and this translation as a stick may have contributed to the contemporary belief that the mistletoe was made into a spear of considerable size.<sup>447</sup> This is somewhat odd given that mistletoe (*viscum album*) is actually a parasitic bush that although it grows on trees is not a tree itself. Because of its diminutive stature, it is hardly capable of being crafted into a formidable spear; a needle perhaps, but not a spear. Snorri seems to have been aware of this since he has Loki 'sleit upp' or 'pluck up' the plant rather than chopping it down, as one would a tree. It will be left to the next chapter to learn how interesting a plant the mistletoe is, as James Frazer was fascinated by it. At this point, however, there is only a suggestion rather than proof that the mistletoe could be considered an object of worship in Norse culture during the totemism stage of development.

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<sup>446</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes Books I-IX*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. by Peter Fisher 2 vols (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), I, pp. 69-75.

<sup>447</sup> Even 18<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic manuscripts of the *Prose Edda* are guilty of this interpretation.

## Trees at the end of the world

Following the description of Baldr's death, the *Völuspá* poet continues the gloomy imagery with roosters waking the dead and mankind fighting one another before providing the last glimpse of Yggdrasill in strophe 47:

Skelfr Yggdrasils askr standandi,  
ymr it aldna tré en iqtunn losnar.<sup>448</sup>

Yggdrasill shudders, the tree standing upright,  
The ancient tree groans, and the giant is loose.<sup>449</sup>

This is the final stage in Yggdrasill's progression towards destruction. The shivering of the tree is associated with the giant who is breaking loose. According to Dronke, this giant is Loki and the shivering of the tree is caused by an earthquake.<sup>450</sup> As was seen above in *Lokasenna*, it was believed that when Loki struggled against his fetters an earthquake would occur.<sup>451</sup> It is significant that the final reference to Yggdrasill is juxtaposed to mankind destroying itself. This is a further suggestion that the *Völuspá* poet saw a connection between mankind and Yggdrasill. As one was affected, so was the other.

After the poet summarizes which gods fought which monsters in the great Ragnarøk battle, the world, like the gods, succumbs to the fate to which the *völva* alluded earlier in the poem.

Sól tér sortna, sígr fold í mar,  
hverfa af himni heiðar stiðrnor;

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<sup>448</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.11.

<sup>449</sup> *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p.10.

<sup>450</sup> *The Poetic Edda*, ed. by Dronke, p. 57.

<sup>451</sup> See page 45.

geisar eimi við aldrnara,  
leikr hár hiti við himin siálfan.

The sun turns black, earth sinks into the sea,  
the bright stars vanish from the sky;  
steam rises up in the conflagration,  
a high flame plays against heaven itself.

Sér hón upp koma qðro sinni  
iqrð ór ægi iðiaqræna;  
falla forsar, flýgr qrn yfir,  
sá er á fialli fiska veiðir.

She sees, coming up a second time,  
Earth from the ocean, eternally green;  
the waterfall plunges, an eagle soars over it,  
hunting fish on the mountain.<sup>452</sup>

Although Yggdrasill is not explicitly mentioned in *Völuspá*'s cycle of destruction and recreation, it makes a veiled appearance in both *Gylfaginning* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. Snorri interprets the fire as the giant Surt's doing, 'Því næst slyngur Surtr eldi yfir jör'dina ok brennir allan heim' or 'after that Surt will fling fire over the earth and burn the whole world.'<sup>453</sup> Snorri also says in *Gylfaginning*:

En þar sem heitir Hoddmímis holt leynask menn tveir í Surtaloga er svá heita: Líf ok Leifþrasir; ok hafa morgindoggvar fyrir mat. En at þessum mǫnnum kemr svá mikil kynslóð at byggvisk heimr allr.

In a place called Hoddmimir's holt two people will lie hid during Surt's fire called Life and Leifþrasir, and their food will be the dews of morning. And

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<sup>452</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 14; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 11-12.

<sup>453</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 51; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 54.

from these people there will be descended such a great progeny that all the world will be inhabited.<sup>454</sup>

Snorri then quotes, without citation, the passage from *Vafþrúðnismál* that was examined previously in the Tylor section which essentially restates what he has just narrated.<sup>455</sup> However, when this statement was originally made in *Vafþrúðnismál*, it names Hoddmimir's holt as a refuge from the 'Fimbulvetr', a three year winter which precedes the events of Ragnarøk. Snorri seems to assume that Líf and Leifþrasir remained in Hoddmimir's holt throughout Ragnarøk as well.

In actuality, Hoddmimir's holt is a kenning for the base of Yggdrasill, combining a host of natural and mythological symbols. The Old Norse 'hodd' refers to treasure or a hoard and, given that, Mimir and his wisdom well are situated at the bottom of Yggdrasill. It is a fitting parallel.<sup>456</sup> A 'holt' has become a common term in English for the den or shelter of an animal, typically a fox, but in this Icelandic sense it should be understood as a stony hill.<sup>457</sup> So, Hoddmimir's holt can be understood as the stonehill at the base of Yggdrasill where Mimir keeps his treasure and at least according to Snorri and potentially the poet of *Vafþrúðnismál*, Yggdrasill is believed to survive Ragnarøk and provide shelter for mankind.<sup>458</sup> Though the poet of *Völuspá* is not clear on the fate of Yggdrasill,<sup>459</sup> the evidence from the other two sources further substantiates the idea that tree worship existed among the early Norse.

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<sup>454</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 54; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 57.

<sup>455</sup> See page 123.

<sup>456</sup> Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 277.

<sup>457</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 108.

<sup>458</sup> One potential problem is that Mimir's well is supposed to be in Jötunheimr.

<sup>459</sup> The tree may have been burned, or swallowed up, by 'Surt's Kin', in strophe 47, but this may also refer to the roads to Hel.

Finally, after what might seem like a flood of mythological allusions, we come to the last strophe, and more specifically, the last line of the poem. The final line of *Völuspá* is actually the first time a definitive link can be seen between the *völva* of this poem and the *völva* of *Baldrs draumar*. The line reads: ‘Nú mun hón sökkvaz’ or ‘Now will she sink’. This stands as the mirror opposite to the lines in *Baldrs draumar* when Óðinn used his magic to raise a reluctant *völva* out of her grave.

### *Lang’s Survivals In Old Norse*

The key question that must be answered regarding Andrew Lang’s scholarship is whether or not there is sufficient evidence that Norse society, as glimpsed through the *Poetic Edda* and other early medieval works detailing their mythology, demonstrates the types of survivals that Lang felt existed in all societies at some point. With the exception of the principle that stated that members of the society would accept the first explanation they are given for phenomena, it appears that there is evidence in the Norse system of all of the other Lang principles. What then has this chapter as a whole contributed to an understanding of Old Norse myth?

## **Chapter Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, the main goal has been to advance an understanding about possible early states of Norse society and their evolution. In order to do that, the ideas of survivals and totemism from the scholarship of Tylor and Lang have been scrutinized within the context of select Old Norse literature.

Tylor saw myth as a method of explaining the physical world and he felt that many cultures used myths in similar ways. Thus, his comparative methods

resembled those of the first chapter scholar, Max Müller. Tylor, however, based his scholarship upon anthropological data, not etymological analysis. In these mythic explanations of the natural world that Tylor uncovered, he thought it possible to see earlier states of a society (survivals); if these earlier states involved the worship of plants or animals, one could surmise that the society had experienced a stage of totemism at some point.

It was evident from the examination of *Vafþrúðnismál* in the beginning of this chapter that there were many parallels, pertaining to eclipses, celestial parentage and disembodied cosmography, between the Norse explanations of the natural world and other archaic cultures from around the globe. What proved difficult was unearthing any clear evidence of an obvious survival of a previous state of Norse society. There were only hints about the importance of horses, based on their involvement in the movement of the celestial bodies, and a reverence for trees, revealed by the use of a tree to shelter mankind from Ragnarøk. Finally, the idea that cultures continued to evolve gained credence by the frequent tendency of Snorri to expand a myth from the *Poetic Edda* when he retold it in prose form.<sup>460</sup>

Lang felt that all cultures experienced a savage or archaic state and the cultures that evolved beyond this state left survival traces of it in their mythology. As had Tylor, Lang believed that if these traces showed evidence of worship of animals or plants, then that particular culture had likely passed through a stage of totemism. Lang argued that in its archaic state, a culture would have six characteristic beliefs: 1) that everything existed on the same level of existence, 2) that certain members of the tribe had magical powers, 3) that the dead remained an active force in the world, 4) that the definite characteristics of an individual could be

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<sup>460</sup> This is not to suggest however that Snorri had access to the same *Poetic Edda* in the same form as contemporary scholars.

located external to their body, 5) that death was not a natural occurrence, and 6) that people's curiosity was easily appeased as to why an aspect of the world was as it appeared to be.

Through an examination of *Völuspá*, and other material that used *Völuspá* as a source, it was shown that Norse society has traces of the first five of Lang's characteristic beliefs. The sixth belief appears to be a direct contradiction to what Norse society believed because instead of being easily satisfied, the Norse seemed to prefer complicated explanations and have a clear desire for more knowledge. More importantly, the examination of *Völuspá* revealed better examples of plant, or more specifically tree, reverence and it was seen how Old Norse material established a strong connection between mortal human beings and trees. In the mythological narratives, man and woman were created by the gods out of wood, the Norse world was supported by the massive Yggdrasill tree (a tree that also provided safe haven for mankind during Ragnarøk), and the tree parasite mistletoe was responsible for slaying Baldr (itself the catalyst for Ragnarøk). Additionally, the commentary of Adam of Bremen suggested that the Swedes at Uppsala worshipped and sacrificed to a specific tree, making it hard to argue that the Norse did not move through a stage of totemism at some point prior to the crafting of these works.

However, other than this last example from Adam, we are letting *Völuspá* do almost all of the theoretical 'heavy-lifting'. Just because a narrative poem contains a possible allusion to trees being important does not in any way guarantee this to be true of the society that created the poem. What is lacking is any substantial weight of historical examples of worship practices that can be linked to the Norse, and ideally the content of *Völuspá* and other *Poetic Edda* poems. As such, what has been learned so far about possible Norse totemism is still only a very general sketch. To



form a more specific picture, the focus must shift to the exhaustive scholarship of Sir James Frazer.

## Chapter Three:

### Ritual Origins

As in the previous chapter, the focus here will remain on anthropological approaches to the study of myth, but in this section (and the fourth and final chapter) the emphasis will be primarily on theorists who felt that mythological narratives were fundamentally tied to rituals. The ways in which they were tied forms the heart of each scholar's theories. This chapter will examine two Scotsmen who travelled south to England to make their academic reputations. The first is William Robertson Smith, a theologian who argued that myths were always secondary to rituals, and the second is Sir James Frazer, author of the epic *The Golden Bough*. It was Frazer who argued that there was a history of tree worship among the early Norse, something that he believed was a survival of general early European tree worship.

These two men have been chosen for inclusion not so much because of the similarities in or differences between their theories, but because they were a significant influence on the scholars who followed them. In fact, they were actually very close friends and since Smith was Frazer's mentor and inspiration during the formative years of his scholarship, his work will be treated first.

The Old Norse material will be both focused and scattered in this chapter. To develop an understanding of Smith and to see the differences between his and Tylor's theories, the poem *Vafþrúðnismál* will once again come into play. But for the examination of James Frazer, the scope of enquiry will have to be expanded. Finally with Frazer, we will be able to consider the work of a scholar who writes specifically about Norse material. The material he chose to consider therefore will be used to determine how well Frazer's theories concerning Old Norse myth actually

work. But for the sake of comparative consistency, primarily in regard to the work of Lang, once again focus will be directed to *Völuspá* to determine how well Frazer's theories work when applied to a specific *Poetic Edda* poem.

## **William Robertson Smith (Nov. 1846 – March 1894)**

### *Church Controversy & Anthropology*

Like Andrew Lang before him, William Robertson Smith was both a Scotsman and an anthropologist interested in the development of religion. Yet Smith had the added characteristic of being an actual minister of the Free Church of Scotland and it was this tie to the church that shaped much of Smith's life and work.

Born in Aberdeenshire in 1846, Smith demonstrated his scholastic aptitude at an early age by entering university at fifteen and becoming a professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament by the age of twenty-three.<sup>461</sup> The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was the work more than anything else that defined Smith's life. In 1875 he wrote two entries for the encyclopaedia, 'Angel' and 'Bible', wherein he put forward the idea that biblical texts had been written by men, not God, and could therefore be analyzed as historical texts to learn about the societies that produced them.<sup>462</sup> This did not sit well with the Protestant church in Scotland and Smith was prosecuted for heresy and though acquitted of the charge, Scotland had become an inhospitable place for Smith. He moved south in 1883 to become a member of Trinity College, Cambridge. It was in January of the following year that Smith met James Frazer one evening after a dinner at Trinity. Frazer had been given a copy of Tylor's *Primitive*

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<sup>461</sup> Robert Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.58-59.

<sup>462</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 vols (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), II, pp. 26-28; III, pp. 634-648.

*Culture* by the psychologist James Ward the previous year while on a walking-tour of Spain, so his mind was on anthropological and Spanish matters.<sup>463</sup> These ideas apparently spilled out during that first meeting with Smith, and although Frazer would later admit that Smith had bested all of his arguments that evening, a lasting friendship began to develop.<sup>464</sup> Frazer quickly became engrossed in Smith's field of anthropology.<sup>465</sup> Smith, by now the editor of the *Encyclopaedia*, asked Frazer to write two entries for the ninth edition, one on 'Taboo' and another on 'Totemism'.<sup>466</sup> These essays laid the ground work for the rest of Frazer's scholarship.

If there was any doubt concerning Smith's effect on Frazer, one only has to examine Frazer's own preface to *The Golden Bough* where he states:

'My interest in the early history of mankind was first excited by the works of Dr E.B. Tylor, which opened up to me a mental vista undreamed of before. But it is a long step from a lively interest in a subject to a systematic study of it, and that I took this step is due to the influence of my friend W. Robertson Smith.'<sup>467</sup>

This statement was made largely in response to Smith's 1889 work *Religion of The Semites*, a work from which this essay will derive most of Smith's theories. Beyond its propelling influence on Frazer, Smith established a framework in that book for interpreting how mythology and ritual practice worked together. He was one of the first Victorian scholars to suggest that mythology arose as a product of ritual observance, and by doing so, created a whole new approach to myth analysis.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Fraser, *The Making of the Golden Bough*, p.45.

<sup>464</sup> Ackerman, J.G. *Frazer: His Life and Work*, p. 60.

<sup>465</sup> Ackerman, J.G. *Frazer: His Life and Work*, p. 62.

<sup>466</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, XXIII, pp.20-23; and pp. 495-506.

<sup>467</sup> Fraser, *The Making of the Golden Bough*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>468</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, p. 36.

### *Myth and Ritual*

Smith wrote relatively little that was expressly about mythology, yet he made it very clear that in his view, mythology when compared to ritual was only of secondary importance in understanding the people who created it. His argument can be summarized as follows: Smith felt that in ancient religions, mythology occupied the place that later religions would fill with dogma. Myths were the sacred stories of holy men and common people. They did not set down a list of rules per se for the performance of religious acts, but rather illustrated lessons to be learned from the stories they told about the gods. These stories afford the only explanations still extant of the precepts of these ancient religions.

Smith argued that in terms of an ancient community's religion, the mythological tales actually comprised no essential part of religious practice. This was because the stories had no sacred sanction and no binding force on the worshippers. Myths connected with individual places or events were just part of the process of the worship; their only purpose was to stimulate the imagination of worshippers to keep them engaged in the act of worship. Worshippers would often be offered a choice of several narrative explanations of the same ritual, but as long as they fulfilled the ritual properly, what they believed about its origin was inconsequential. In fact, Smith felt that belief in a specific series of myths was neither a necessary part of early religion, nor was it supposed that a man could acquire some sort of religious merit or garner the favour of the gods through belief of a specific narrative explanation.

What Smith felt was necessary was the dutiful performance of specific sacred actions prescribed by a society's religious tradition. Accepting this, Smith felt that mythology ought not to take the prominent place that was often assigned to it in the contemporary study of ancient faiths. As long as a myth consisted of explanations of ritual, there was value to it but it was altogether secondary. He even went so far as to say with confidence that in most cases the myth was likely derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth. This was because he felt that the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, that the ritual was obligatory but having faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshiper.

In his examination of world myths, Smith concluded that the main themes of the myths from early societies were connected with either the rituals associated with particular shrines or with the religious observances of particular tribes or districts. As time passed and rituals were continually performed at these sites, there would eventually come a point when the original reason for the rituals would have either been forgotten or become confused. It was only at this point that Smith felt mythological narratives would emerge, to serve as explanations of the mandatory rituals a society had to perform and to stimulate participation. Smith concluded that if an explanation of a mythological narrative was deemed necessary, the explanation should not be sought in the arbitrary allegorical theories that were popular in his day (such as Tylor's), but rather in traditional usage and the ritual that the myth was tied to.<sup>469</sup>

### *The Example of Leviticus*

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<sup>469</sup> William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adams and Charles Black, 1894), pp. 17-18.

As with Müller's explanation of the myth of Prokris and Kephalos, it will be useful here to examine one of the specific explanations that Smith offered to support his theories. As already noted, Smith was a minister and his most important work was the *Religion of the Semites*. Not surprisingly, the book deals heavily with the Bible, with the focus on the Old Testament. One particularly good example of how Smith sees early rituals and the stories that emerge from them can be seen in his treatment of the Book of Leviticus.

This book of the Hebrew Bible contains a multitude of topics, but Smith was particularly interested in the system of sacrifice introduced in the very first chapter. Leviticus spells out for the reader exactly how and for what reasons people should make sacrifices to their god, referred to here as their lord. It provides lists such as: for person W who has been a part of event X, you are to sacrifice object Y and you are to do this through method Z. One abbreviated example would be:

If the priest that is anointed do sin according to the sin of the people; then let him bring for his sin ... a young bullock without blemish unto the LORD for a sin offering. And he shall bring the bullock unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD; and shall lay his hand upon the bullock's head, and kill the bullock before the LORD...And the priest shall put some of the blood upon the horns of the altar of sweet incense before the LORD, which *is* in the tabernacle of the congregation; and shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering.<sup>470</sup>

Smith did not think, however, that this was a completely accurate representation of the earliest sacrificial practices of the Israelites. In fact, Leviticus was written as a description of the sacrifices that occurred at the second temple of

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<sup>470</sup> Leviticus, 4. 3,4,7.

Jerusalem, which stood from 516 BCE to 70 CE. This temple had replaced the first temple which was destroyed at the time of the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE.<sup>471</sup>

According to Smith, 'though the ritual of Jerusalem as described in the Book of Leviticus is undoubtedly based on very ancient tradition [...] the system as we have it dates from a time when sacrifice was no longer the sum and substance of worship.'<sup>472</sup> Smith argued that true ritual sacrifice was practiced at the first temple, and even earlier before any central temple existed.

Following the destruction of the first temple and the Israelites' return from exile, they rebuilt their temple and resumed their sacrifices, but not with the same motives as had existed previously:

In the old time every town had its altar, and a visit to the local sanctuary was the easy and obvious way of consecrating every important act of life. No such interweaving of sacrificial service with everyday religion was possible under the new law, nor was anything of the kind attempted. The worship of the second temple was an antiquarian resuscitation of forms which had lost their intimate connection.<sup>473</sup>

Smith felt that the Book of Leviticus thus stands as a perfect example of a narrative account that was written about a system of rituals that had lost their earlier significance. He even goes on to suggest that within the text of Leviticus the reader is witnessing the evolutionary development of the Israelites' religion.

The Book of Leviticus, with all its fullness of ritual detail, does not furnish any clear idea of the place which each kind of altar service held in the

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<sup>471</sup> For an analysis of details and dates surrounding the temple as explained in Biblical texts, see Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, trans. by David Green (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 141-143.

<sup>472</sup> Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>473</sup> Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 199.



old religion, when all worship took the form of sacrifice ... there is reason to believe that the desire to avoid all heathenism, the necessity for giving expression to new religious ideas, and the growing tendency to keep the people as far as possible from the altar and make sacrifice the business of a priestly caste, had introduced into the ritual features unknown to more ancient practice.<sup>474</sup>

By the time Leviticus was written, the Israelite community had already evolved, having moved away from a system of personal worship and sacrifice towards a system where an elite section of society, the priests, performed the sacrificial act for the community. The ritual was still being maintained by the priestly caste and this was a key feature in the evolution of a society's religious practice according to Smith. The explanation of the ritual was only written in Leviticus to reinforce the performance of that ritual. Use of rituals to maintain a certain hierarchy also potentially can be seen in Old Norse material.

### *Vafþrúðnismál as a Riddle-poem*

Having established an outline of Smith's general approach to rituals, and the narratives that could be attached to them, it is possible to begin to hypothesize how Smith might view Old Norse material, specifically the poem *Vafþrúðnismál* that was examined earlier from Tylor's perspective. Smith's view would be quite different from that of Tylor because for Smith, explanations of how the natural world functioned were merely entertainment. What would have been significant in *Vafþrúðnismál* would be the import of the riddles, the systematic tradition of exchanged questions captured in what is now commonly called a wisdom poem.<sup>475</sup>

It does not matter than the two principle characters are a giant and the chief of the

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<sup>474</sup> Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 199.

<sup>475</sup> See page 29 for Larrington's and de Vries's introductions to the genre.

gods. It also does not matter that cosmography is the topic of the questions, nor are the answers of more than secondary importance. What is important, what the riddle poem reveals for Smith, is that *Vafþrúðnismál* provides evidence that a particular ritual existed in early Nordic society. It shows the reasons for such a ritual, how that ritual was performed, and the consequences of it. Furthermore, it is an example of a practice which might have been quite common in early Nordic society since *Vafþrúðnismál* is not the only extant example of wisdom or riddle contests among the Nordic peoples.

### **Structure of *Vafþrúðnismál***

In the examination of Tylor, little emphasis was placed on the mechanics of *Vafþrúðnismál*, but for Smith this is an essential feature. As mentioned above, the poem is comprised of fifty-five strophes and the role of speaker changes back and forth between every strophe. The only exception to this alternation occurs in the fifth strophe which is a narration. There is no prose in the poem at all. The first four strophes are an introduction in which Óðinn asks Frigg for advice on challenging the giant Vafþrúðnir's wisdom. Frigg asks him not to go, but Óðinn is determined and goes anyway. Since none of Frigg's advice is followed or even acknowledged, the intent of this section appears to be only to set up the idea that Vafþrúðnir is very wise and that Óðinn intends to challenge him. The introduction does not form any part of the ritual; it merely sets up the action.

Between the sixth to tenth strophe, Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir greet one another, with some hostility. Óðinn is in disguise as 'Gagnráðr' and the consequences for their impending contest are established. In the seventh strophe, Vafþrúðnir states that the contest is to the death when he says, 'Út þú né komir órom hǫllum frá nema

þú inn snotrari sér.’ ‘May you not come out of our halls alive unless you turn out to be the wiser one.’<sup>476</sup> Both parties tacitly accept this condition, and Vafþrúðnir begins asking questions.

From the eleventh to the eighteenth strophe, Vafþrúðnir asks four questions that involve the horses responsible for day and night, the river that separates the gods and giants, and the field on which the giant Sutr and the gods will do battle. Óðinn provides answers for all four, which then prompts Vafþrúðnir to restate the consequences of the contest by saying ‘høfði veðia við scolom hóllo í, gestr, um geðspeki’, ‘we shall wager our heads in the hall, guest, on our wisdom’.<sup>477</sup> At this point, the role of inquisitor switches to Óðinn.

Beginning in strophe twenty, Óðinn asks a series of eighteen questions on topics such as the design of the world; the moon and the sun; the origins of the giants, man and the seasons; the source of the wind; and the events of Ragnarøk. Vafþrúðnir is able to answer all of these questions, save for the last one. Óðinn’s final question is: ‘Hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi, siálfr í eyra syni,’ ‘What did Odin say into the ear of his son before he mounted the pyre?’<sup>478</sup> With this, Óðinn asks an unsolvable riddle, revealing his true identity, since he alone could know the answer to the question. Though Vafþrúðnir now realises who his adversary truly is, it does not matter. He knows that he is going to die as a result of the contest, acknowledging in the final strophe of the poem, ‘feigom munni mæltá ec

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<sup>476</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.46; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 41.

<sup>477</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.48; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 43.

<sup>478</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.50; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 48.

mina forna staði oc um ragna rǫc’, ‘with doomed mouth I’ve spoken my ancient lore about the fate of the gods.’<sup>479</sup>

In the previous chapter, it was seen that approaching the poem from Tylor’s perspective meant focusing on the descriptions of natural phenomena found in the poem. Emphasis was placed on an interpretation that the Norse believed the celestial bodies had parents, suggesting that they therefore believed that the Sun they saw in the sky would not always be the same entity. From Smith’s perspective, this is all superfluous information. Interesting it might be, but it does not tell anything about *Vafþrúðnismál*’s true significance. From the internal evidence of the poem, Smith might be able to hypothesize about the importance of wisdom contests for the early Norse, but a true understanding can only be obtained by extending the scope of the investigation.

### **Other Wisdom/Riddle Poems**

In the *Poetic Edda*, the previously discussed *Alvíssmál* provides another example of a contest very similar to that found in *Vafþrúðnismál*. As seen in the first chapter, it is a dialogue between the dwarf Alvíss and the god Þórr.<sup>480</sup> Þórr asks the dwarf to provide the names, as given by various races, to a long list of natural phenomena with the prize seemingly being Þórr’s daughter. There are marked similarities in the topics to the back and forth dialogue of Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir. Alvíss provides Þórr with correct answers, but the poem ends badly for the dwarf, not with an unanswerable question but with the rising of the sun, a signal of his doom.

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<sup>479</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.55; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 49.

<sup>480</sup> See page 29.

There are notable differences between these two poems. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, the contest is between the god Óðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir, rather than between the god Þórr and the dwarf Alvíss in *Alvíssmál*. The significant feature in the latter contest is its one-sided nature: Þórr asks all the questions and Alvíss provides all the answers. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir take turns asking and answering questions until Vafþrúðnir is unable to provide a correct answer. The goal in each poem is also different. *Vafþrúðnismál* is an example of a challenge whose express purpose is to establish who has superiority of knowledge, whereas the challenge in *Alvíssmál* is a means to an end, the end being who will get to control the destiny of Þórr's daughter.<sup>481</sup> In both poems, however, loss of life ends is the penalty for failure. The failure of Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál* comes as a direct consequence of his failure of wisdom, which is significant, whereas the failure of Alvíss in *Alvíssmál* is a result not of a lack of knowledge but rather of his being delayed (tricked) into continuing the contest until other events defeat him.

In Old Norse literature, the most extensive example of riddles and wisdom contests is the previously mentioned *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vítra*.<sup>482</sup> This saga is one of the 'fornaldarsögur' or 'sagas of ancient times' and details events surrounding the life of a king named Heiðrekr. In the ninth chapter of the saga the reader meets an enemy of Heiðrekr named Gestumblindi whom the king has invited to his home in an expressed effort to effect reconciliation, even though Heiðrekr intended to do his guest ill. Gestumblindi knew going into the meeting that he was

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<sup>481</sup> The alternative argument could be that *Vafþrúðnismál* is an example of Óðinn's quest for wisdom and that he seeks to extract as much information from Vafþrúðnir as possible, playing his trump card, the question to which only he knows the answer, once he has exhausted Vafþrúðnir knowledge. However, as will be seen later, there appear to be rules governing the performance of this type of contest, chief among them being that the questioner must already know the answer to his query in order to assess the respondents answer.

<sup>482</sup> Other European examples of this can be found in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II* and the Irish *Colloquy of the Two Sages*, Carolyne Larrington, 'Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál': Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Geography*, ed by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 63.

not the equal of King Heiðrekr so he made sacrifices to the god Óðinn for help. Óðinn went to see the king disguised as Gestumblindi and, not realising this was a god and not the enemy he wanted to eliminate, the king offered Gestumblindi the choice of being judged by his wise men or setting the king a riddle he cannot answer. Gestumblindi chooses the second option. What follows are thirty riddles with Óðinn taking on the role of Þórr (questioner) and the King taking the part of Alvíss (respondent).

Some of the riddles are rather simple and based on natural phenomena such as:

Hverr er sá inn mikli,  
er líðr mold yfir,  
svelgr hann vötn ok við;  
glygg hann óast,  
en gumna eigi  
ok yrkir á sól til saka?  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.

Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þessar. Þat er myrkvi; hann líðr  
yfir jörðina, svá at ekki sér fyrir honum ok eigi sól, en hann er af, þegar  
vind gerir á.

Who is that great one,  
over ground passing,  
swallowing wood and water;  
the wind fearing,  
but fleeing no man,  
and waging war on the sun?  
This riddle ponder,  
O prince Heidrek

Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi,' said the king; 'I have guessed it. That is fog; it passes over the earth, so that one cannot see because of it, not even the sun; but it is gone, so soon as the wind gets up.<sup>483</sup>

While others require specific knowledge of the Old Norse cosmos:

Hverjar eru þær ekkjur,  
er ganga allar saman  
at forvitni fǫður;  
sjaldan blíðar  
eru þær við seggja lið  
ok eigu þær í vindi vaka  
Heiðrekr konungr,  
hyggðu at gátu.

Þat eru Ægis ekkjur, svá heita öldur.

What women are they  
wandering together,  
by their father unceasing sought;  
kind they are but rarely  
to the race of men,  
and they must awake in the wind?  
This riddle ponder,  
O prince Heidrek!

Those are the women of Aegir,' said the king; 'that is what the waves are called.<sup>484</sup>

King Heiðrekr is able to answer all questions save the last one. The final riddle is the same as that posed by Óðinn to Vafþrúðnir:

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<sup>483</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. by Tolkien, pp. 38-39.

<sup>484</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. by Tolkien, p. 41.

Hvat mælti Óðinn  
í eyra Baldri,  
áðr hann væri á bál hafðr?

What said Odin  
in the ear of Balder,  
before he was borne to the fire?<sup>485</sup>

Óðinn once agains asks the question that only he could possibly answer correctly, and as a consequence King Heiðrekr is brought to defeat. Aware now of who his opponent really is, Heiðrekr attacks his guest. Óðinn flees from the king, predicting that the king will be slain by his slaves, a prophecy that becomes reality in the very next chapter of the saga.<sup>486</sup>

As the scholar Maria E. Ruggerini points out, there is an apparent system of governing rules for the questions that can be asked during a wisdom contest, and the Óðinn character is a rule-breaker. The first rule is that the questioner should always know the answer to the query so he knows when the respondent is correct. Óðinn breaks this rule in strophe 42 of *Vafþrúðnismál* when he asks Vafþrúðnir where the giant's knowledge comes from, something only the giant could know. The second rule is that the queries should be about topics that the respondent has the ability to know or workout. Óðinn breaks this rule in both *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Saga Heiðreks* by asking a question he alone can possibly answer: what did he say into the ear of his dying son.<sup>487</sup> One might say the second rule is that of fairness, a rule the gods, or at the very least Óðinn, do not have to observe.

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<sup>485</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. by Tolkien, p. 44.

<sup>486</sup> *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. by Tolkien, pp. 44-45.

<sup>487</sup> Ruggerini also shows how a later fairytale, 'The Emperor and the Abbot' breaks this mould. 'An abbot must solve three riddles to save his life; fearing that he will fail the test, he sends a poor man to



## Reconstructing the ritual

From these narratives, the following generalizations can be made about what an ancient Nordic wisdom contest looks like to an outside observer. First, there are only ever two participants, Alvíss and Þórr, Gagnráðr (Óðinn) and Vafþrúðnir, Gestumblindi (Óðinn) and Heiðrek. Second, the questioning can either be a back and forth exchange or feature a single questioner and one respondent. In *Alvíssmál* and *Heiðreks Saga*, one party asks the questions and the other answers them, but in *Vafþrúðnismál* both parties take turns doing the asking and answering. Third, there is the presumption that the questioner knows the answer to any queries he chooses to ask. Fourth, and finally, the contest is to the death. One of the parties must die as a result of the intellectual battle. Alvíss is doomed by the sun, Heiðrek is killed by his slaves as Óðinn predicts, and Vafþrúðnir who has stated at the beginning of the contest, strophe seven, that only the wiser of the two of them would leave his hall alive, pronounces in the final strophe his own doom.

Smith would still need to answer the question of why these contests had a place in Norse literature and what they revealed about Norse society. The answer may lie in the cast of characters found competing in these three examples. In terms of participants, the most important detail in all three instances is that a god is one of them, and more than that, he is always the victor. Óðinn defeats Heiðrekr, Óðinn defeats Vafþrúðnir, and Þórr gets the better of Alvíss. Old Norse wisdom contests may not have determined godliness, but they certainly were a measure of the superiority of the gods. Perhaps their example also served as a tool whereby leaders

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try to win the contest for him – which he does by answering the Emperor’s supposedly unanswerable question “What am I thinking?” with the reply “You are thinking, mistakenly, that I am the Abbot.” Maria Elena Ruggerini, Appendix. ‘A Stylistic and Typological Approach to Vafthrudnismál’, in John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), pp. 141-142.

could establish themselves on the top of a social hierarchy by virtue of demonstration of their superior knowledge, a concept that will be thoroughly explored in the next section.

This last argument can never be more than a hypothesis. It has already been seen and will continue to be seen that the questions regarding the origins of any myth or ritual and the uses to which they were put are difficult for all the theorists to answer. But crafting a reasonable set of hypotheses concerning mythology within Smith's methodological framework is handicapped from the outset because of the scant attention he directs toward the topic. This is not a problem that will be encountered with the next scholar.

### **Sir James George Frazer (Jan. 1854 – May 1941)**

#### *The Early Life of Frazer*

James Frazer was born in Glasgow on New Year's Day, 1854, two years before Max Müller published his *Comparative Mythology*. The eldest son of a prominent chemist, Frazer grew up in a comfortable Scottish middle-class family. The family was deeply religious, his father being described as a 'staunch Presbyterian and Free Churchman'.<sup>488</sup> Though Frazer admitted that he never found his family's religion tedious, one of his biographers, Robert Ackerman, suggests that it seems not to have engendered in him any personal sense of devotion, despite the fact that Frazer would spend almost all of his adult life discussing religion.<sup>489</sup> He studied classics first at the University of Glasgow in 1869, and then at Cambridge in 1874, winning honours and accolades at both institutions. In 1875 he met the

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<sup>488</sup> The Free Church of Scotland was the very same church in which Smith was a minister.

<sup>489</sup> Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, pp. 9-11.

philosopher James Ward who would be a lifelong friend and would, in 1883, introduce Frazer to Tylor's *Primitive Culture* when they travelled together in Spain.<sup>490</sup> As noted above, in the winter of the same year he was introduced to William Robertson Smith. The foundations for Frazer's epic work *The Golden Bough* were laid.

Without doubt, Frazer could be labelled as an extremely well read man. He was described by many as being socially awkward and reclusive, spending much of his time with books. For example, by the start of his second year at Cambridge he had read almost the entire canon of classical Greek and Latin literature, and his desire to amass knowledge through the reading of books would be a lifelong passion.<sup>491</sup> Perhaps it is due to this fact that Frazer's projects tended to grow exponentially.<sup>492</sup> In 1885, Frazer wrote an article on 'Totemism' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, at Smith's request, which became an 87-page book by 1887, and then in 1910 became his *Totemism and Exogamy*, a two thousand page work spanning four volumes. A similar pattern occurs with his *Encyclopaedia* article on 'Taboo' which began as a three page summary. From this it transformed into the two volume *The Golden Bough* in 1890, which expanded to three volumes in 1900, and then ballooned to twelve volumes in 1911. This essay draws from the third edition, which was the last that Frazer worked on. Though the wealth of resources contained within this *magnum opus* cannot be denied, what is also apparent to any reader is that Frazer can lose his audience in the mass of his examples.

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<sup>490</sup> Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, p. 39.

<sup>491</sup> Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, p. 20.

<sup>492</sup> Ackerman argues that it is due to his hope of being a storehouse of data for future scholars. Frazer was willing to change his mind as he discovered new things. Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer*, p. 41.

## *Examining The Golden Bough and Baldr Narratives*

As did the previous scholars, Frazer believed that human society evolved through different stages. Similar to Tylor, Frazer thought there were three distinct phases that were defined by the different ways people believed they could explain and affect the world they lived in: through Magic, Religion or Science. A society in the magic phase would exhibit behaviour amongst its population that could be categorized as either imitative or contagious, both of which are reminiscent of Lang's 'like affects like' category of savage magic detailed above.<sup>493</sup> As with Lang, Frazer argued that these modes of behaviour were governed by specific individuals, whose roles were to control the world for that society. However, as time passed, as the society evolved, a realization would occur that there were things their magic individuals could not control. This would lead to a new phase characterized by the rise of religion.<sup>494</sup> A religious society, much like a society in the magic phase, believed in 'a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.'<sup>495</sup> However, these external powers 'nevertheless can be turned to account by any one who knows how to manipulate them by the appropriate ceremonies and spells'.<sup>496</sup> The science stage of society, which had only been achieved by modern Western societies of the

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<sup>493</sup> See page 138 above. Imitative magic was the belief that affecting something that resembled your intended target would cause the same effects on the actual target. Contagious magic was the idea that affecting a part of something could affect the whole. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 12 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906-1915; repr. London: Macmillan and Co, 1922-1935) I, I, pp. 55-214. Frazer divides his twelve volumes into seven different 'parts' with one or two volumes within each part. For example volume ten is not listed as such; instead it is part VII, volume I. The citations have been formatted to match, part first and volume second, with Frazer's style.

<sup>494</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, I, pp. 239-240.

<sup>495</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, I, p. 222.

<sup>496</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, I, p. 225.

nineteenth century, was the eventual destination towards which all societies should be evolving, according to Frazer.

There is one narrative drama that underlies the entirety of *The Golden Bough*, and that is the story of the Grove at Nemi. In this ancient Italian grove, which was sacred to the fertility goddess Diana, there was a priest who was called the 'king of the woods'.<sup>497</sup> He was seen as the consort of Diana, a representation of vegetation and was responsible for ensuring the fertility of the woods, and by extension the surrounding community.<sup>498</sup> However, when the priest began to fail in his ability to provide fertility, it was necessary that he be killed.<sup>499</sup> The only way to do this would be for another man to remove a branch, a golden bough, from one of the trees of the grove and kill the priest with it. That man would then become the new priest and take on all of the powers and responsibilities of the role. Frazer felt that traces of this drama could be found all over Europe, with supporting examples in the far reaches of the world, and that it was an indication of ancient European rituals devoted to vegetation or fertility spirits. Of significance to this study, he believed that the myths surrounding Baldr demonstrated the reasons why the ritual required the new would-be king to remove a branch and kill the current king with it.

Frazer explained the significance of the Baldr myth as such:

Whatever may be thought of an historical kernel underlying a mythical husk in the legend of Balder, the details of the story suggest that it belongs to that class of myths which have been dramatized in ritual, or, to put it otherwise, which have been performed as magical ceremonies for the sake of producing those natural effects which they describe in

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<sup>497</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, I, p. 7.

<sup>498</sup> Frazer explains that the true power came from Diana, as most early societies were matriarchical. *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 266-323. The European Spring festivals that featured a ritual marriage were survivals of the belief that the union of the king (the crops) and Diana (fertility) could improve the abundance of the peoples' crops. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 7-58, 120-170.

<sup>499</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, III, pp. 9-119.

figurative language. A myth is never so graphic and precise in its details as when it is, so to speak, the book of the words which are spoken and acted by the performers of the sacred rite. That the Norse story of Balder was a myth of this sort will become probable if we can prove that ceremonies resembling the incidents in the tale have been performed by Norsemen and other European peoples. Now the main incidents in the tale are two—first, the pulling of the mistletoe, and second, the death and burning of the god; both of them may perhaps be found to have had their counterparts in yearly rites observed, whether separately or conjointly, by people in various parts of Europe.<sup>500</sup>

Some of Smith's influence over Frazer can be seen in this passage when he notes that the generic form of this ritual was performed by all European peoples, but that the narrative took on local characters in different regions. Thus, the Norse had their tale of Baldr, just as the Italians had their tale of Nemi, but Frazer would argue that the ritual they both were tied to was the same.

The goal in examining Frazer is twofold. The broad objective is to determine how well Frazer uses the two incidents, as he calls them, of the pulling of mistletoe and the killing and burning of gods, to demonstrate that the Baldr narrative was in fact a transcript of a sacred ritual the Norse associated with vegetation or fertility. To accomplish this, the numerous references Frazer provides to European plant veneration and fire festivals will be examined.

The second more focused objective is to determine how much the *Poetic Edda* specifically can support his argument, as this will allow for comparisons to be made to the others scholars previously considered, especially the magic/totemism arguments of Andrew Lang. Frazer himself was aware of and quotes three main sources for the death of Baldr, *Gylfaginning*, *Völuspá*, and Saxo Grammaticus. He

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<sup>500</sup>Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 105.

summarizes Snorri's prose narrative from *Gylfaginning* in detail and this would appear to be his primary source given the length of his summary; he also refers to *Vǫluspá* from the *Poetic Edda* which he supplements with the historicizing explanation of Saxo Grammaticus whose suggestion, that Baldr was a real man later deified, Frazer links to Firdusi's Persian poem, *The Epic of Kings* to show worldwide trends.<sup>501</sup> What will become apparent, however, is that Frazer relied primarily on Snorri because neither the *Poetic Edda* nor Saxo contain sufficient evidence to support his theory.

### *Fire Festivals*

Frazer wrote hundreds of pages concerning the topic of fire festivals. He examined many different seasonal fire festivals: Lent, Easter, Beltane, Autumn, Halloween, Midwinter and Need fires, just to name a few, and his examples came from all over the world. Given the importance that Frazer placed on the Midsummer festival in European society, especially with the connection he saw to the Baldr narrative, most of the focus of this analysis will be on the Midsummer festival. Some reference will be made to the other festivals when considering his argument for an overarching theme behind all ceremonial fires.

Frazer spent more than twice the amount of textual space discussing Midsummer fire festivals than he did with any other festival of the same type.<sup>502</sup> Midsummer marks the day when the sun is at its highest point in the sky of the northern hemisphere, and the amount of daylight within a 24-hour period is at its maximum. It is typically on or around June 21<sup>st</sup>. Examples of festivals celebrating

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<sup>501</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 101-103.

<sup>502</sup> For example, in the first volume of part VII of *The Golden Bough*, he devotes sixty pages to Midsummer, while Midwinter only receives twenty-five pages, and the autumn fire festivals are barely mentioned, receiving only two pages of treatment.

this day are abundant, but it is the documentation and analysis he provides of the midsummer festivals in Scandinavia which will be important for this study to make a critical determination of how well Frazer's overarching theories are supported by the evidence he gives.<sup>503</sup>

The actual amount of information Frazer provides about Midsummer fire festivals in Scandinavia is limited. He states that in Denmark and Norway, Midsummer fires were frequently seen on roads or in open spaces. Citing Jacob Grimm's analysis of such fires, Frazer argues that the fires, at least those specific to Norway, were meant to banish sickness from the local cattle. Sometimes people would also make blazing rafts that would be sent down the fjords in the dead of night. Fires also were meant to keep away the witches in the area, and he provides a curious citation about a large communal meeting of witches in 'Blocksberg' as evidence of this.<sup>504</sup>

From Sweden, there is some marginally more specific information. In the province of Norrland, they light roadside fires at intersections with nine different types of wood. Into these fires the spectators throw specific toadstools that are meant to ward off trolls and other evil spirits that may be in the vicinity. In Bohus

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<sup>503</sup> Though the majority of his references are from the British Isles, he also details the practices of people in Albania with their dry herb fires, the aromatic blazes in Algeria, the burning of Martin Luther effigies in Austria, the fertility fires of Belgium, the practice of holding hot coals in one's mouth in Brazil, the village-wide processions in Estonia, the birch fires of Finland, Christian adaptations of pagan rituals in France, the blazing wagon wheels of Germany, jumping over fires due to the fear of fleas in Greece, the barges filled with flowers in Italy, the saint inspired ceremonies in Malta, the purifying effect of fire smoke in Morocco, the specific instructions for starting the fire in Poland, and the naked frolicking of Spanish villagers. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 172-219

<sup>504</sup> The citation is curious because in his footnotes, Frazer states that this is 'information supplied by Mr. Sigurd K. Heiberg, engineer, of Bergen, Norway, who in his boyhood regularly collected fuel for the fires. I have to thank Miss Anderson, of Barskimming, Mauchline, Ayrshire, for kindly procuring the information for me from Mr. Heiberg.' This demonstrates that using third hand anthropological data posed no problem for Frazer. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 171.



and Scania, the celebrants fire off guns while dancing around and leaping over hilltop fires that were formerly called ‘Balder’s Bålar’ or ‘Balder’s Balefires’.<sup>505</sup>

It is somewhat surprising that given the wide scope of Frazer’s source material that he does not reference the work of the sixteenth century writer Olaus Magnus.<sup>506</sup> Writing from Rome in 1555 after being forced to leave his bishopric at Uppsala, Magnus wrote three volumes on all matters of life among the peoples of northern Europe that had been translated into English by 1658. What should have been interesting to Frazer and his focus on fire festivals in general are Magnus’s descriptions of the activity of early Lithuanians and the Norse of northern Scandinavia. The Lithuanians revered three features of the natural world: the woods, fire and serpents. They believed that their gods lived in the forest and that burning their dead kings could make them gods as well. What surely also should have interested Frazer is the description of the northern Scandinavians (from what area other than ‘just below the north pole’ Magnus does not specify) who burn the bones of animals they have hunted as offerings to their gods. ‘However, they do not burn these bones in the summer months, in case they should seem to mock the light or heat of the sun, but, when the fearsome winter comes on, they consume them with fire at a public assembly to mark certain festival days.’<sup>507</sup> This last example is an illustration of how fire was important at more points of the year than simply Midsummer, and suggests a connection the Norse might have made between fire and the sun. Since this fits nicely into the explanation of festivals that Frazer was

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<sup>505</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 172.

<sup>506</sup> For a discussion of Olaus’ writing style and techniques, see Kurt Johannesson, *The Renaissance of the Goths in Sixteenth-Century Sweden*, trans. by James Larson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 163-170.

<sup>507</sup> Olaus Magnus, *A Description of the Northern Peoples*, trans. by Peter Fisher, ed. by P.G. Foote, 3 vols (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1996), I, pp. 149-151.

developing, one is tempted to surmise he either did not trust Magnus as a source or was unaware of him.

### **Solar Interpretation**

There were two main explanations for the general significance of fire festivals that were current in Frazer's day. Neither of them was original to him and he only summarized them in order to support his own third explanation. The first theory came from Wilhelm Mannhardt and stated that the festivals were meant to influence the sun in some way.<sup>508</sup> This could either mean maintaining the supply of sunshine or restoring the power of the sun. In the cloudy and cold climate of large parts of Europe, Mannhardt thought the sun was more important to people living in these northern areas as opposed to those who might be prone to take it for granted given abundant exposure to the sun, such as those cultures living closer to the equator.<sup>509</sup>

If one examines the timing of the festivals, it then can be, and was, argued as a second, associated component of this theory that they were coordinated with specific solar events. Obviously, the greatest of these would be the solstice and equinox events which mark specific turning points in the sun's annual course.<sup>510</sup> Midwinter fires occurred around the 21<sup>st</sup> of December when there is the least amount of daylight and the sun is lowest in the sky of the northern hemisphere. While Frazer acknowledges that it is only reasonable to have a festival when the fire and heat from the sun finally stops waning and begins waxing, most of his discussion of the

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<sup>508</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp.331-341. For the original argument, see Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Der Baumkultus der Germanen und Ihrer Nachbarstämme* (Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger, 1875), p. 521 §8.

<sup>509</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 331

<sup>510</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 222.

midwinter festivals revolves around the Yule log, with minimal emphasis on solar connections.<sup>511</sup>

Again, one might think, Magnus's observations regarding the northern Scandinavians would be of considerable applicability. Instead, Frazer argues that the strongest argument in a favour of a solar connection to midwinter is the belief that the festival was originally a celebration of the birth of the sun. This pagan celebration was adapted by the Christian church and changed into Christmas. The Yule log was meant to be a catalyst for restarting the strength of the sun.<sup>512</sup> Alternatively, Frazer thought that the autumnal equinox around September 22<sup>nd</sup> had little significance in most European cultures, as was also the case with the spring equinox around March 21<sup>st</sup> or at the very least, neither had significant links to solar events.<sup>513</sup>

Another postulate supporting a solar connection argument was that the frequent use of burning symbols during festivals were representations of the sun. Frazer cites the Germans as providing several good examples of this. One is a tradition from the Bavaria region in which young boys and girls 'set fire to wheels of straw and send them rolling down the hill'.<sup>514</sup> Another comes from the city of Konz where only the male population of the city was allowed to congregate on top of a hill outside the city, with a 'huge wheel completely encased in some of the straw which had been jointly contributed by the villages'. The wheel was then lit on fire and young boys from the village would guide it down the hill trying to get it to the nearby river Moselle. Should they succeed, it meant that the surrounding vineyards

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<sup>511</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 246.

<sup>512</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 331-332. The Bushmen of South Africa have a similar practice in July (when the sun and heat are the weakest for their southern hemisphere country) when a specific piece of burnt wood is used to 'temper the cold of winter'. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 332-333.

<sup>513</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 220.

<sup>514</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 166.

would have an abundant vintage for that year. However, if no attempt was made to perform the ceremony, cattle would be struck with madness and dance in their stalls.<sup>515</sup>

An additional piece of support comes from the actual components of festival fires (heat, light, smoke, coals), and the belief that they had some effect on fertility and that this effect was similar to that of sunshine, especially as regards animals and crops. Citing L. Lloyd, Frazer argues that the Swedes believed that ‘the warmth or cold of the coming season is inferred from the direction in which the flames of the May Day bonfire are blown; if they blow to the south, it will be warm, if to the north, cold’.<sup>516</sup> This was not an isolated example: Frazer provides numerous examples of cultures that demonstrated a belief that this grant of fertility could be bestowed on livestock, produce and people.<sup>517</sup>

Finally, the practice of taking pieces of the fire away from the main pyre, such as torches or piece of coal, and spreading them among the crops was a means of representing the spread of sunshine to the vegetation. Frazer argues that this tradition was a common practice in parts of France, such as Picardy, where on the first Sunday of Lent people would carry torches through the fields in order to excise the rodents and assure an abundant crop. Children would run through the land, also

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<sup>515</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 163-164.

<sup>516</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 159 and 336. Frazer does not discuss that Lloyd claims the total number of fires, even or odd, was also a factor in the coming season and that these fires had a history of producing visions of the dead or summoning trolls. See Llewellyn Lloyd, *Peasant Life in Sweden* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1870), p. 233-235.

<sup>517</sup> In Morocco, the Arab tribe of Ulad Bu Aziz lit midsummer fires for the express purpose of exposing their fruit to what they believed was the fertility enhancing effects of the fire’s smoke. The Berber Rif tribe, also of Morocco, kindled midsummer fires underneath their fruit trees so that the fruit would not fall off the tree early, and the Beni Mgild would rub the ashes of their midsummer fires in the nostrils of their horses and expose them to the fire’s smoke so that they might be strengthened. Frazer states that the French believed that a rainy June season could be counteracted by a midsummer fire, and in the Vosges Mountains specifically, midsummer fires were thought to preserve the fruits of the earth and to ensure good crops. In the Altmark region of Germany it was believed that as far as the light from the Easter fire could be seen, there would be good corn growth and no crop fires would break out.<sup>517</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 113, 142, 170, 188, 214-15, 336.

with torches, in order to fertilize it.<sup>518</sup> In the areas around Surenthal and Winenthal of Switzerland, young boys would take torches from the midsummer fire ‘and run to fumigate the pastures [...] on their way back the boys strew the ashes over the fields, which is supposed to make them fertile.’<sup>519</sup> During the Halloween fires of Scotland, a young boy would lay ‘down on the ground as near to the fire as he could without being scorched, and thus lying allowed the smoke to roll over him’ which was meant to help him find marital success.<sup>520</sup> In parts of Ireland, live coals were taken from the midsummer fires and placed in the corn-fields to prevent blight.<sup>521</sup>

Though it is a point that shall be revisited at the end of this section on festival fires, the problem with Frazer’s preceding analysis, in regard to the applicability of its extension to the Baldr myth, is that although he provides numerous examples of solar connections with festival fires, he only gives one example from the Nordic territories: the Swedish belief concerning the direction of the wind. Thus while his seemingly countless examples of the importance of these festivals to the European peoples as a whole are impressive, his references to beliefs and practices among the Norse specifically are relatively minor and taken alone would hardly be deemed sufficient to support his general theory. While it is unreasonable to expect a scholar to have read every available piece of source literature on a topic, given the monumentality of Frazer’s documentation, it does raise questions as to why he did not include Magnus’s evidence.

### **Purification Theory**

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<sup>518</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 113.

<sup>519</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 170.

<sup>520</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 233.

<sup>521</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 203.

The second explanation of the origins of fire festivals grew out of the work of scholars Edward Westermarck and Eugen Mogk. They held that the fires were seen as a means of purification, burning up or warding away evil spirits and people.<sup>522</sup>

The people who took part in these festivals would rarely, if ever, explain their behavior in terms as detailed as that found in the solar theory explained above, they would however, and did, readily explain the festivals as a source of purification from ills that befell people and property. These ills, more often than not, could be traced back to witchcraft.<sup>523</sup> Fires worked in two ways. They could ward off bad things: weather, such as hail, lightning or other similar poor weather; calamities, such as house fires; or sickness, all of which were frequently believed to be the effects of witchcraft. Or they could have a direct effect on the actual witches, wizards, demons or other evil spirits by chasing them away or destroying them.

Frazer's examples of fires as a deterrent are once again quite numerous, and the frequency of prevention explanations increases dramatically when examining midsummer festivals.<sup>524</sup> Previously we have already encountered some of Frazer's

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<sup>522</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp.341-346. Westermarck for example cites the Moroccan belief that misfortune was an infection that could be cleansed with fire or water. Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan and co., 1906), I, p. 57; Eugen Mogk, 'Sitten und Gebräuche im Kreislauf des Jahres,' in R. Wuttke *Sächsische Volkunde* (Dresden: G. Schönfeld, 1901), p. 310.

<sup>523</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp.341-342.

<sup>524</sup> In the Belgian province of Namur, 'men and cattle who traversed the Lenten fires were thought to be safe from sickness and witchcraft', a story Frazer links to a similar one from the Ardennes where shepherds 'drove their flock through the smoke and flames as a sure means of guarding them against sickness and witchcraft'. In the southern Germany region of Swabia, an effigy of a witch was burned in the Lenten fires and its ashes were planted in the flax fields in order to keep the vermin away. A similar practice occurred during Easter when people brought sticks to the ceremonial fires where they would char them among the flames and then take them back to their homes for protection against fire, lightning and hail. Frazer tells us that the Beltane fires of Scotland, on the first of May, were thought to be a 'preservative against witchcraft, and a sovereign remedy against malignant diseases, both in the human species and in cattle'. In Austria around the same time of year, people kindled fires in crossroads and pastures to dance around them. Frazer states: 'the ceremony is called "burning the witches."' In some places an effigy representing a witch was also burnt in the bonfire.' Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 108-109, 117, 121, 146-148, 159, 183 & 188.

examples that are pertinent here, such as the burning of rafts in Norway, but most of his examples are from further afield.<sup>525</sup>

A 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, familiar with associations between the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and the occult, might reasonably expect that Frazer's section on the Halloween fires of Europe would be bursting with examples of ways to ward off witches and prevent their craft. In fact, Frazer barely addresses the topic, dismissing it instead with comments like: 'in the Isle of Man also, another Celtic country, Hallowe'en was celebrated down to modern times by the kindling of fire, accompanied with all the usual ceremonies designed to prevent the baneful influence of fairies and witches.'<sup>526</sup> No details are given as to what he means by 'usual ceremonies', which is particularly unfortunate in light of the fact he has provided so many diverse examples for other concepts. This does not mean Frazer avoids the purification topic altogether in his Halloween festival section, but his argument is that these fires were mainly associated with fertility, and the need to marry, and only secondarily as a means of warding off evil influences. An example of the confluence of these two motives is seen in Scotland where, before the Halloween fire, 'various magic ceremonies were then celebrated to counteract the influence of witches and demons, and to

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<sup>525</sup> Festivals in Switzerland, also mentioned above, where boys ran around pastures with burning sticks to fumigate them, also had the intent to 'drive away all the demons and witches that molest the cattle'. In some districts of Germany, Frazer states that the people 'crown or gird themselves with mugwort while the midsummer fire is burning, for this is supposed to be a protection against ghosts, withes, and sickness [...] they used to drive cows through the midsummer fire to guard them against witchcraft'. Similarly, in parts of Russia at the midsummer bonfire, 'the young folk wear garlands of flowers and girdles of holy herbs when they spring through the smoke or flames; and sometimes they drive the cattle also through the fire in order to protect the animals against wizards and witches, who are then ravenous after milk.' Frazer states that in Estonia, pyramid fires of juniper trees were constructed and burnt to keep the witches away from the cattle. In Normandy, the practice of midsummer fires had all but been abandoned by Frazer's time, but he argues that there used to be brushwood fires that were meant to protect the cattle from witchcraft, specifically against those witches and wizards that would attempt 'to steal the milk and butter'. And finally, from other parts of France, Frazer tells us that the use of these witch-warding fires was not always a communal event. In the Perche region to the southwest of Paris, he claims there were farmers who lit small private bonfires in their farmyards to protect their cattle from witchcraft. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 170-171, 174-176, 180, 185 & 188.

<sup>526</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 244.

prognosticate to the young their success or disappointment in the matrimonial lottery'. Curiously, each family or village would then light their own fire and attempt to scatter their neighbours', which somehow helped to determine fertility. The details of the magic ceremonies designed to counteract the witches are not provided, Frazer preferring instead to describe how the fires are formed from peat, and giving instructions that the proper way to scatter a fire is with one's foot.<sup>527</sup>

Frazer's discussion of midwinter is dominated almost entirely by the topic of the Yule log. Unlike the above examples of outdoor public festival fires, the Yule log ceremony was for the most part an indoor private event among families or small groups of people.<sup>528</sup> The northern French region of Normandy, which had close historical links to the Norse that go unmentioned by Frazer, provides good examples of many of these practices. For instance, the oldest male member of the family was responsible for preparing a log for the private family ceremony on Christmas Eve. He would place it into the hearth when the village Christmas service began, and upon hearing the bell which proclaimed the sacrament during the Mass, 'the patriarch sprinkled the burning log with holy water, blessed it in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and drew it out of the fire. The charred log was then carefully kept till the following Christmas as a precious relic which would guard the house against the levin bolt, evil spirits, sorcerers, and every misfortune that might befall in the course of the year.'<sup>529</sup> The Yule log served a similar purpose in England where it sometimes was stored underneath one's bed until the next Christmas in order to protect the house from fire; and in Wales it was simply kept for luck and according to Frazer 'in some families this is done from

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<sup>527</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 232-233. How this exactly equates to a 'matrimonial lottery' Frazer does not explain.

<sup>528</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 247.

<sup>529</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 252.



force of habit, and they cannot now tell why they do it; but in the past the observance of this custom was to keep witches away, and doubtless was a survival of fire-worship'.<sup>530</sup> This is an example that would be of interest to both Tylor and Smith because it is a practice that has survived from earlier days that continues to be practiced despite losing the reason for doing so. Finally, in Serbia, there was a complex set of rituals surrounding the Yule log and Christmas which lasted several days, the intention being to assure the milk from the cows would make heavy cream and that the ewes would properly tend to their lambs.<sup>531</sup>

There is some contradiction in the rationales provided by Frazer for fire festival practices that had both solar and purification functions. One example is that the flaming wagon wheels that were rolled down hills and across fields as a representation of the sun's path were also said to be a mobile evil deterrent.<sup>532</sup> Another instance would be the torches that were carried throughout villages and into pastures as representative of the sun's light were also said to be a means of chasing away the vermin that plagued the crops.<sup>533</sup> The contradictions or confusions regarding the rationales for effigies being burned in many festival fires brings into focus the problems in Frazer's presentations.

The first explanation given is that effigies are surely representations of witches, wizards or other malignant human forces on society. Frazer provides countless examples of this, and surely for some societies that was a definitive conclusion. It is a known fact that at many points throughout history actual people

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<sup>530</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, pp. 255, 258. Though this is no longer a popularly observed tradition, the practice has been adopted and modified by the United States where a television show of a burning log inside a fireplace is broadcasted on Christmas Eve night or Christmas morning. The image is a continuous loop and the program can last from two to four hours. Lawrence F. Arcuri, <http://www.theyulelog.com/htmls/home.html>

<sup>531</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 262.

<sup>532</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 345.

<sup>533</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 340.

were burned in fires because they were believed to be detrimental to society, one example being the hundreds of people convicted of witchcraft and burnt in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. This practice was documented well into the Middle Ages, thus Tylor's survivals theory allows one to assume that the practice was not unheard of in earlier times. Since the tradition of witch burning continued, Frazer argues that stand-ins for witches would have also been used. Frequently these surrogates came in the form of animals whose shape the society thought the witches could assume. Frazer explains that in many cultures the cat was the likely culprit, but in Wales and Germany it was believed that witches could adopt the form of serpents and foxes, so it was these creatures that were burned alive in festival fires.<sup>534</sup> As time passed, and the practice of burning live animals was frowned upon, effigies took their place. The burnings by that point, according to Frazer, were only a matter of tradition, or as Tylor might have characterized it, they were survivals from a previous time when they were meant to be representations of witches. In this, we can see an entire evolution from burning actual human beings to representations or animals, all for the purpose of warding off malignant forces.

Mannhardt, introduced earlier as the proponent of the solar theory, had an alternative argument.<sup>535</sup> Perhaps it was true that these effigies were a substitute for an earlier practice of burning actual human beings, but instead of looking for an explanation involving the prevention of witchcraft, Mannhardt proposed that the rationale for the practice was more about assuring fertility, that by burning these individuals somehow the crops or people would be more fertile. For example, he claimed the druidic Celts had specific practices that were meant to insure the fertility of the land. Using condemned criminals, Mannhardt stated that the Celts would

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<sup>534</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 39, 41.

<sup>535</sup> Mannhardt, *Der Baumkultus der Germanen*, p. 529.

construct giant wicker containers and fill them with the men, along with cattle and other animals, and then the containers were set afire. The more victims there were, the greater the fertility of the land.<sup>536</sup> In this instance, Mannhardt believed that the humans were stand-ins for the vegetation spirits.<sup>537</sup> Nor would Tylor have been surprised by the evidence of the survival of this Celtic practice that Frazer identified in Douay, Dunkirk, Brabant and Flanders where up until the eighteenth century giant wicker men were paraded through the towns, often with human men inside them. Often they were simply parade figures with no remaining fertility connotations, but in certain parts of France the custom of burning the wicker men continued, without human occupants, into the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>538</sup>

### **Frazer's Third Way**

Not satisfied that a single function, solar or purification, of the fire festivals could serve to tell the whole story, Frazer took parts of both theories and created a third. Of the two, Frazer was more doubtful of Mannhardt's solar theory. He felt that it was improbable because cultures in hot climates, such as Morocco, would not want to intensify the power of the sun in anyway.<sup>539</sup> With Westermarck and Mogk in mind, Frazer also felt that all the cultures he examined had things that they were afraid of, foremost among these being witches, so he could well understand the idea that fires were meant to protect the people. Still, this does not mean that Frazer did not accept the merits of Mannhardt's position, and on some occasions he conceded the possibility of the solar theory being valid. While Frazer identified the effigies

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<sup>536</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp.32-33.

<sup>537</sup> Why these spirits would grant fertility to the land based on the quantity of sacrifice made to them is not explained however. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp.43.

<sup>538</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp.32-38.

<sup>539</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 346; II, p. 16. Similar to the northern Scandinavians whom Magnus told us sought not to offend the sun during the summer months.

that were burned in the fires as likely representations of witches, he also did allow that the effigies could have been representations of vegetation deities who needed to be courted, rather than witches who needed to be feared. Vegetation requires both heat and light to grow, thus burning the representation of vegetation could easily be seen as a means to secure an adequate supply of sunshine for the crops.<sup>540</sup>

With all this in mind, Frazer identified a common underlying theme between both theories and this was that the purpose of the fires was in some way to preserve or enhance the fertility of the community that participated in these practices. The solar argument proposed that the fires were meant to ensure the fertility of the crops because the fire was a representation of the sun. The purification theory held that the fires drove or kept away evil forces that could threaten the fertility of cattle, crops and men. Regardless of the agents, the goal of each theory was the same: safeguarding fertility. In this way, Frazer ties the fire festivals back to his overall goal of demonstrating the existence of a general ‘vegetation spirit’ for the European peoples. In the earliest forms of the ritual, the king who had assumed the role of ‘vegetation spirit’ would be burned after he had been killed, like Baldr, and the new king would then safeguard the peoples’ fertility. Over time, the focus on the king/spirit was lost, and the fertility safeguard was transferred to the fire instead.

### **Fire Festival Evidence in *Völuspá***

In a careful examination of *Völuspá*, Frazer would undoubtedly want to focus on strophe thirty-three where reference is made to Óðinn’s son bringing Baldr’s killer to what appears to be a funeral pyre:

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<sup>540</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 21-23.

Þó hann æva hendr né hofuð kembði,  
áðr á bál um bar Baldrs andscota;

Nor did he ever wash his hands nor comb his hair,  
Until he brought Baldr's adversary to the funeral pyre;<sup>541</sup>

This passage could be understood in several ways, either that Baldr's killer is being brought to Baldr's funeral pyre, or that the adversary is being brought to a fire, not necessarily the one in which Baldr is burned. Either way, it is a clear reference to a ceremonial fire of some sort. However it is not *Völuspá*'s first reference to a fire.

As mentioned previously in the examination of Lang,<sup>542</sup> strophe twenty-one states:

Þat man hon fólkvíg fyrst í heimi,  
er Gullveigo geirom studdo  
ok í holl Hárs hána brendo,  
þrysvar brendo, þrysvar borna,  
opt, ósialdan; þó hon enn lifir.

She remembers the first war in the world,  
when they buttressed Gullveig with spears  
and in One-eye's hall they burned her;  
three times they burned her, three times she was reborn,  
over and over, yet she lives still.<sup>543</sup>

The Baldr strophe contains limited information at best. It can be assumed that the funeral pyre mentioned is Baldr's, but the poet does not explicitly say so. Later commentators, specifically Snorri, and other poets take as a given that the pyre was that built for Baldr and either expand upon it, as Snorri did, or make reference to it, like the poet of *Vafþrúðnismál* did in the final strophe of that poem. Regardless,

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<sup>541</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.8; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 8.

<sup>542</sup> See page 162.

<sup>543</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.5; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 6.

this particular strophe does not suggest any ritual elements other than the general idea of a funeral pyre. The earlier strophe about Gullveig, however, contains a significant number of details about a Norse fire event that reveal possible ritual characteristics. First, Gullveig was pierced by a specific type of weapon, spears. Second, she is burned a specific number of times, three; and in a specific place, Óðinn's hall. Finally, she is reborn a specific number of times, again the number is three, although it is not said how.<sup>544</sup> Thus, it appears this is a potentially useful example of what an Old Norse fire festival ritual might have entailed. Unfortunately, Frazer engages in no significant discussion of this strophe or the Gullveig character anywhere in *The Golden Bough*.

### **Fire Festival Evidence elsewhere in Old Norse Literature**

When searching outside *Völuspá* but still within the *Poetic Edda*, the strongest suggestion of a fire festival or ritual can be found in *Grímnismál*. In this poem, the character Óðinn, disguised under the name Grímnir, is suspended between two fires by a king called Geirrod in an attempt to make him speak. Óðinn hangs this way for eight days without food or drink, but on the ninth day the king's son, Agnar, brings him water. Óðinn then relates to Agnar information about the world. Though a fair amount of the poem's setting is provided in introductory prose, and its credibility therefore is open to debate, the first two strophes provide a window into what this ritual might have looked like:

Heitr ertu hripuðr, ok heldr til mikill:

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<sup>544</sup> For an argument that Gullveig was tied to the process of purifying gold, see Fischer, 'Gullveigs Wandlung', pp. 581-596. An alternative theory, that she was a part of a ritual sacrifice and battle, is given by Heino Gehrts, 'Die Gullveig-Mythe der Völuspá', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 88 (1969), pp. 312-378.

göngomk firr, funi!  
loði sviðnar, þótt ek á lopt berak,  
brennomk feldr fyrir.

Átta nætr sat ek milli elda hér,  
svá at mér mangi mat né bauð,  
nema einn Agnarr, er einn skal ráða,  
Geirrøðar sonr, gotna landi.

Hot you are, fire, and rather too fierce;  
go away, sparks!  
My fur cloak singes, though I lift it in the air,  
my mantle burns before me.

Eight nights I have sat here between the fires,  
and no one offered me food,  
except Agnar alone, and he alone shall rule,  
the son of Geirrod, over the land of the Goths.<sup>545</sup>

From this, one learns that the ritual might have involved one individual, placed close enough to fire that he would almost be burned. The person is kept there for nine days without any refreshment, and on the ninth day is induced to talk. The motivation, in this instance, was perhaps to determine kingly succession, as Geirrod dies at the end of the poem and Óðinn has proclaimed that Agnar would rule after his father.<sup>546</sup> Unfortunately, as was also the case with the story of the burning of Gullveig, Frazer does not discuss *Grímnismál* or the trial of Óðinn. This was certainly not due to unawareness of Óðinn, for Frazer notes that Óðinn appears to be

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<sup>545</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.55; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 52.

<sup>546</sup> How this ritual could have occurred as described is problematic. The human body could not survive without water for over a week when in close proximity to intense heat.

a god to whom sacrifices were made, but he does not specifically connect fire rituals to these sacrifices or to the character in any other way.<sup>547</sup>

Snorri provides the most detailed narrative summation of Baldr's funeral fire. In *Gylfaginning*, he states that after Baldr was killed, his body was taken to the sea and his ship, Hringhorni. A giantess named Hyrrokin is called to launch the ship and when she pushes it out to sea, fire springs from the rollers turning underneath the ship's keel. Once Baldr's body is brought onto the ship and placed on the pyre, his wife Nanna dies from grief. She is then also carried to the pyre and the fire is started. Þórr consecrates the pyre with Mjöllnir and then kicks the dwarf Lit into the fire. Snorri also describes the manner in which the gods came to the pyre, but more importantly, he says that Baldr's horse, with all its equipment, was also placed on the fire and that Óðinn laid the golden ring Draupnir there as well. After meeting Baldr in Hel, the character Hermóðr is given this ring to bring back to the gods.

Several details contained in this story suggest ritual elements. The first is the use of a ship for the burial ceremony. The second is that the ship is burned. Third, Baldr's wife and horse accompany him on the pyre; and finally fourth, the ring Óðinn places on Baldr's dead body travels with him to Hel and back again. The implications to be drawn from Snorri's description include a belief that death did not signal a permanent end to everything: if the funeral was conducted properly, items and even people would accompany the individual, with a presumable future purpose. Baldr's ring, for instance, goes to Hel but will return to the gods.

Archaeological evidence has clearly established the importance of ships in early Norse burial practices, but the ways in which a ship figured in the burials has

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<sup>547</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, III, p. 160



differed.<sup>548</sup> The Oseberg burial in Norway was one where an entire ship was sunk into the ground. In Sweden, there are examples of burial grounds where setting stones were arranged in the pattern of a ship.<sup>549</sup> But perhaps the best parallel of Snorri's Baldr narrative is the ninth century account of Ibn Fadlan who described a Norse burial of a dead chieftain. According to Fadlan, the Norse not only burned their king on a ship, they burned him along with a slave woman, disembowelled horses and all of his weapons, believing that the flames make it easier to transition to the world of the dead.<sup>550</sup>

None of these topics are dealt with by Frazer. He simply noted that Baldr was burned on a fire and left his exposition at that.

### **A Critique of the Fire Festival Theory**

Before moving on to the second aspect of the Baldr myth—the significance of the mistletoe and other magical plants—a brief examination of the way in which Frazer has presented his arguments and the difficulties inherent in them needs to be made.

The first issue is his use of dates: he rarely uses them. Frazer locates most of his examples by giving the country, region and time of year in which they occur(ed). Case in point: 'In Berry, a district of Central France, the midsummer fire was lit on the Eve of St. John.'<sup>551</sup> Is this an example from Frazer's contemporary period? Is this an example from the fifteenth century? If one were to consult Laisnel de la Salle's *Croyances et Légendes du Centre de la France*, presumably it ought to be

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<sup>548</sup> See Davidson. *The Road to Hel*. pp. 16-29 for a comprehensive examination of archaeological finds (prior to the 1940s) and pp. 39-50 for literary references to ship burials.

<sup>549</sup> The 'Ales Stenar' in southern Sweden, which is the best example of this, was potentially in use hundreds, if not thousands, of years before the start of the Common Era, suggesting a very long history of importance.

<sup>550</sup> For a complete summary of the burial, see Montgomery, 'Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah', pp. 14-21.

<sup>551</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, I, p. 189.

possible to establish the times and places of these practices, but the imperative to do so Frazer leaves to the reader.<sup>552</sup> However, surely this is something that is his scholarly responsibility since Frazer makes frequent arguments about the progression of practices among people, due to the influence of Tylor's evolutionary theories. As this is lacking, we are often left asking ourselves whether the events Frazer cites continued to go on into his day or even into our modern period.

Yet paradoxically, the biggest problem in Frazer's 250-page exposition regarding fire festivals was actually a lack of specific examples. As pointed out above, the greatest problem for this study, in an attempt to analyze Frazer's theories regarding European fire festivals and their relationship to the myth of Baldr, is that he rarely brings up Baldr. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the few cultures that have obvious direct links to the Baldr narrative also receive marginal treatment. Frazer provides a very limited amount of information about the Norse midsummer festivals, and even less about how the occurrences at these festivals fit into his overall theory. In fact, the only applicable example Frazer provides concerns the Swedish belief that the direction of wind during the May Day fire would forecast what the coming season would be like. As his stated goal for this section of *The Golden Bough* was to show how the Baldr narrative was a Nordic equivalent to the Italian Nemi ritual, it is a puzzlement why he did not fill it with Nordic examples. If Frazer was one's only guide to this topic, one would have no evidence of fire festivals in Iceland, the main region responsible for the preservation of most of the narratives concerning Baldr, Saxo being a Danish exception.<sup>553</sup>

Instead, Frazer defaults to the use of the evidence that was likely the most readily

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<sup>552</sup> It appears that this particular reference is to the late sixteenth century. Germaine Laisnel de la Salle, *Croyances et légendes du centre de la France* (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Centrales Des Chemins de fer, 1875), pp. 78-83

<sup>553</sup> For example the large bonfires associated with 'Prettándabrenna' that occur in Iceland thirteen days after Christmas Eve.

available to him, examples from his own British Isles and continental Europe (most notably Germany and France). Yet unlike many European festivals, the practice of lighting bonfires was then and still is very much a part of Nordic life. The Walpurgis bonfires in Sweden (valborgsmässoafton) are set on April 30<sup>th</sup>, a tradition that is taken very seriously and continues to the present day when it is marked as a national ‘half’ holiday, where people have the afternoon off from work. While Frazer makes passing reference to this in early parts of *The Golden Bough*, the fire festival component is not explored in any detail, preferring instead to focus on the specifics of setting up the May-pole and the singing of children.<sup>554</sup>

In summation, these problems demonstrate an issue that plagues Frazer throughout *The Golden Bough*. Although his wealth of examples initially lends credence to the pan-european nature of his arguments, too often the central point of those arguments is lost amidst its details. *The Golden Bough* in its final version was twelve volumes long and the first discussion of Baldr and his significance only appears in the third chapter of volume ten, and then is only approximately five pages long. In the discussion of fire festivals that the Baldr myth supposedly spawned, no mention of Baldr is made, other than noting that Swedish bonfires carried Baldr’s name at some unidentified point in time prior to Frazer’s writing.

### *Mistletoe*

In his consideration of the second essential aspect of the Baldr myth, the significance of the mistletoe, Frazer continues along the same lines of reasoning. The argument for solar and purification origins of the use of fire in various rituals

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<sup>554</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 64-65.

will be rejoined once again in this section, as Frazer thought both theories had merit in regards to the importance of mistletoe and other magical plants used similarly.

As was the case with festival fires, Frazer believed the most important time to focus on the appearance of mistletoe was the midsummer period. Unfortunately, he remains exclusively focused on midsummer festivals, not examining any instances of practices that utilize mistletoe at different points of the year.

### **Magic Plants**

Frazer identified traditions all over the world that evidenced a cultural belief that on Midsummer's Eve certain plants gained temporary magical properties. In Saintonge and Aunis in western France, though he does not say what type of herbs they were, Frazer provides a good example of what will be seen in many of the coming references. He quotes J.L.M. Noguès, who says:

[...] the Eve of St. John was the day of all days for gathering the wonderful herbs by means of which you could combat fever, cure a host of diseases, and guard yourself against sorcerers and their spells. But in order to attain these results two conditions had to be observed; first, you must be fasting when you gathered the herbs, and second, you must cull them before the sun rose. If these conditions were not fulfilled, the plants had no special virtue.<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 45. See J. L. M. Noguès, *Les mœurs d'autrefois en Saintonge et en Aunis* (Saintes, 1891), p. 71.

Plants had served medicinal purposes for millennia, but what is significant here is the revelation that in order to receive those benefits, the plants had to be gathered in a very specific way. One might wonder, and later scientists might test, if there actually was an empirical difference in the composition of plants at different hours of the day that made the efficacy of the medicinal qualities of plants variable, but whether or not the procurer of the plant had eaten clearly modern science would say could have no actual effect on the properties of the plant. Thus we see that controlled gathering behaviour, for the people of western France, has become the basis of a ritual regarding plants.<sup>556</sup>

Frazer's argumentation along the lines of a solar connection, the idea that the object draws its power from resemblance of the sun, can also be seen here with plants. One example he provides comes in the form of the hawkweed plant (*Hieracium*) that is gathered on Gallows' Hill at noon on Midsummer Day to assure good luck. According to Frazer, its 'yellow flowers may be likened not inaptly to

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<sup>556</sup> Frazer cited a similar tradition that existed in Brandenburg where the people 'gather all sorts of simples on Midsummer Day, because they are of opinion that the drugs produce their medicinal effect only if they have been culled at that time. Many of these plants, especially roots, must be dug up at midnight and in silence.' Again, timing of collection in the night hours might have legitimacy in empirical fact, but pinpointing the precise hour of the night and the imperative for silence are clearly ritualistic behaviours. In what was once known as Eastern Prussia, Frazer states that it was a Midsummer's day custom to gather various herbs and fasten them to a pole that was hung over the doorway that was used to bring the corn in for harvest. Once the harvest was in, the herbs were taken down, some being left with the corn to keep vermin away, and the others preserved as a remedy for diseases. Though this furthers the idea of specific collection rituals, the problem with these examples is that Frazer does not say what herbs were actually collected nor how they were used, so the potential connections we can draw between cultures is limited. Fortunately this is not a problem throughout Frazer's section about magical plants. He points out that, contrary to the mistletoe, 'of the flowers which it has been customary to gather for purposes of magic or divination at midsummer none perhaps is so widely popular as St. John's wort.' In the Austrian Tyrol, people believed that if you put St. John's wort (*Hypericum*) in your shoe before sunrise on Midsummer Day, you could walk for the entire day without becoming fatigued. Frazer also states that people from the Saintonge region of France would gather the flower on Midsummer Eve and hang it in their houses as a means of detecting sorcerers. If any such being entered the house, the flower heads would immediately drop to the ground. Frazer lists the plant as also being used for a healing balm in Sicily, a door dressing in Wales to chase off evil spirits, and a truth serum in unspecified parts of medieval Europe. However, he does not specify whether these last few examples are specific to the Midsummer period. Frazer's own reasoning for this particular plant's popularity is a solar one: 'for the flower blooms about Midsummer Day, and with its bright yellow petals and masses of golden stamens it might well pass for a tiny copy on earth of the great sun which reaches its culmination point in heaven at this season.' So here, once again, one finds a visual solar connection to Midsummer. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 48, 49, 54-56.

the disc of the great luminary whose light they love'.<sup>557</sup> In parts of Prussia, the yellow mullein is dug up in silence with a ducat at midnight of Midsummer Eve. Frazer reasons that 'the bright yellow flowers of mullein (*Verbascum*), clustering round the stem like lighted candles, may partly account for the association of the plant with the summer solstice'. Yet he does not rest his theory solely on a connection between their colours: 'We may trace a relation between mullein and the sun in the Prussian custom of bending the flower after sunset, towards the point where the sun will rise, and praying at the same time that a sick person or a sick beast may be restored to health.'<sup>558</sup> However the best example for this study can easily be missed in the mass of Frazer's examples.

Though he does not give the region, Frazer states: 'in heathen times the camomile flower, with its healing qualities, its yellow calyx and white stamens, is said to have been sacred to the kindly and shining Baldr and to have borne his name, being called *Balders-brâ*, that is, Balder's eye-lashes.'<sup>559</sup> Though Frazer cites his sources as the works of Kolbe, Bugge and Kauffmann, this is previously found in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, although Snorri does not claim camomile has any healing properties merely that it is a reflection of Baldr's bright white appearance.<sup>560</sup>

Finally, although it does not involve flowers, there was also a belief that wood cut from specific trees at Midsummer could be used to create useful items, such as divining rods to seek out treasure and water. Frazer tells us that in Brandenburg, in order to procure the rod, one had to approach a bush of hazel (*Corylus*) by walking backwards towards it during the night of Midsummer Eve. Upon reaching the bush, the person would reach backwards between his legs and cut

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<sup>557</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 57.

<sup>558</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 63-64.

<sup>559</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 63.

<sup>560</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 23.

a fork shaped section of the bush. This could then be used as the rod.<sup>561</sup> In Sweden there are differing versions of the means of procurement of a divining rod. Frazer cites Grimm who says that ‘some say that it should then be cut from a mistletoe bough’.<sup>562</sup> Whereas Frazer argues, once again from the perspective of L. Lloyd, that the rod should be made from a combination of woods on Midsummer Eve, those being mistletoe, mountain-ash, aspen and a fourth unspecified timber that Lloyd is unable to remember.<sup>563</sup> Frazer adds a further, necessary condition regarding the mountain-ash: it must be growing in a similar parasitic fashion to the mistletoe. Once the rod is created from these multiple sources, the user goes out at sundown to wherever the treasure is believed to be and sets the rod down on the ground. If there is treasure underneath, the rod will begin to hop about.<sup>564</sup>

As Frazer points out, it is interesting that Midsummer’s Eve, the longest day of sunlight in the northern hemisphere, is when the plants are supposed to gain their special properties: ‘In some mystic way the plants catch from the sun, then at the full height of his power and glory, some fleeting effluence of radiant light and heat, which invest them for a time with powers above the ordinary for the healing of diseases and the unmasking and baffling of all the evil things that threaten the life of man.’<sup>565</sup> Once again Frazer suggests a solar devotion associated with Midsummer, for ‘if the magic flowers of Midsummer Eve thus stand in direct relation to the sun, which many of them resemble in shape and colour, blooming in the meadows like little yellow suns fallen from the blue sky, does it not become probable that the

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<sup>561</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 67.

<sup>562</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 69. See Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, III, p. 289.

<sup>563</sup> See Lloyd, *Peasant Life in Sweden*, pp. 266-267. It should be noted that Lloyd claims the need for aspen is because the cross of Jesus is believed to have been made out of such a tree and the mistletoe is included specifically because it was used to kill Baldr.

<sup>564</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 69. In most of his examples about specific plants or trees, Frazer will provide the Latin botanical name of the topic of discussion. Here, he does not do so for the mountain-ash. Presumably he is discussing *Sorbus aucuparia* (called the Rowan tree in Europe), a small plant that has more shrub characteristics than tree and various folklore connections in Europe.

<sup>565</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 71.

bonfires kindled at the same time are the artificial, as the flowers are the natural, imitation of the great celestial fire then blazing in all its strength?’<sup>566</sup>

These observations on solar connections do not invalidate Frazer’s overall theory regarding the preservation of fertility. While one can admit that flowers have a strong potential solar connection, the effect their temporary magic powers produce is directed towards a purpose. They are a safeguard. They ward off disease, harmful creatures and protect homesteads. And in this, they serve the same purpose as was previously seen with fire. It is striking that almost all of Frazer’s examples come from the Midsummer period. While it may be striking, it is not surprising if one considers the northern hemisphere’s growing season, where Midsummer marks the height for many crops.<sup>567</sup>

### **The Mistletoe Specifically**

With these characteristics identified—magical properties, sensitive harvest times, and Midsummer solar connections—Frazer is finally equipped to discuss the second major element of the Baldr myth: the mistletoe. He relies heavily on Pliny’s description of the druids in Gaul and the way they approached the mistletoe. Frazer’s use of Pliny as a source is a calculated choice. He is not just a writer who can provide Frazer with evidence that supports his general argument. Pliny was an Italian writer from ancient Rome, commenting on the very plant that is responsible for the death of Baldr. This is quite significant for Frazer’s attempt to draw a parallel between *The Golden Bough* tradition in the ancient Italian grove of Nemi and the Norse Baldr narrative.

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<sup>566</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 72.

<sup>567</sup> It would be more detrimental if there were these practices which occurred at times with no connection to festival fires, yet in the very next section we will see an example of this.



Pliny writes that for the druids of Gaul there was nothing more sacred than a sprig of mistletoe growing in an oak tree. They believed that this was a sign that that particular tree had been marked by God. Their method of collecting it was similar to other regimented practices mentioned above; Frazer cites Pliny as saying:

They do above all on the sixth day of the moon [...] because by the sixth day the moon has plenty of vigour and has not run half its course. After due preparations have been made for a sacrifice and a feast under the tree, they hail it as the universal healer and bring to the spot two white bulls, whose horns have never been bound before. A priest clad in a white robe climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloth. Then they sacrifice the victims, praying that God may make his own gift to prosper with those upon whom he has bestowed it.<sup>568</sup>

Nor is this practice confined to ancient times. When the Cambodian people, contemporary to Frazer, would see an orchid growing as a parasite on a tamarind tree (*Tamarindus*), they advised that ‘you should dress in white, take a new earthenware pot, then climb the tree at noon, break off the plant, put it in the pot, and let the pot fall to the ground. After that you make in the pot a decoction which confers the gift of invulnerability.’<sup>569</sup> Though it is a different parasite, the practice detailing its harvest is remarkably the same.

Frazer found a variety of cultures that believed in a medicinal value for the mistletoe. The nineteenth century Ainos of Japan thought the mistletoe would aid against ‘almost every disease’ and that ‘barren women have also been known to eat the mistletoe, in order to be made to bear children’. On the Torres Straits island of

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<sup>568</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 77.

<sup>569</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 81.

Mabuiag (just north of Australia), Frazer states that it is believed a pregnant woman would have twins if she touches or breaks a branch of the loranthaceous plant, a parasitic parallel to the mistletoe. The Walos of Senegambia (western Africa) likewise ‘have much veneration for a sort of mistletoe, which they call *tob*; they carry leaves of it on their persons when they go to war as a preservative against wounds’.<sup>570</sup> However, the most important example for Frazer’s overall theory comes once again from Pliny. Noting it was important that the mistletoe not be allowed to touch the ground after being cut, Frazer again references Pliny’s own Italian people, citing their belief that mistletoe could cure epilepsy, help women to conceive, heal ulcers and act as a fire extinguisher.<sup>571</sup>

Once again, just as Tylor would, Frazer identifies how beliefs regarding the properties of mistletoe survived into modern European society and still reflect Pliny’s ancient beliefs. This is demonstrated in the unique manners in which mistletoe was to be removed from its host tree as well as its healing properties. Frazer provides directions from the Swiss region of Aargau for the collection of parasitic plants: ‘when the sun is in Sagittarius and the moon is on the wane, on the first, third, or fourth day before the new moon, one ought to shoot down with an arrow the mistletoe of an oak and to catch it with the left hand as it falls. Such mistletoe is a remedy for every ailment of children.’ The Swedes and Welsh had similar practices, believing that if the mistletoe was ‘to possess its peculiar virtue, it must either be shot down out of the oak or knocked down with stones’.<sup>572</sup> The Swedes specified that ‘mistletoe must be cut on the night of Midsummer Eve when sun and moon stand in the sign of their might’, while the Welsh thought it should be

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<sup>570</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 79-80. Among the Japanese, it was best if the mistletoe was found growing on a willow tree, as this was their sacred tree.

<sup>571</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 78.

<sup>572</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 81-82.

gathered either on Midsummer Eve or ‘at any time before the berries appeared’.<sup>573</sup> Finally, in the Scottish shires of Elgin and Moray, on ‘the full moon of March people used to cut withes of mistletoe or ivy, make circles of them, keep them all the year, and profess to cure hectic and other troubles by means of them’.<sup>574</sup> In addition to the importance of both the timing and the method of dislodging the plant from its host, it should be noted that the host was an oak tree.

Considering all the healing properties attributed to the plant, it comes as no surprise that druidic beliefs categorized the plant (or as Frazer points out ‘perhaps the oak on which it grew’) as the ‘all-healer’. According to Frazer, this particular term was still used in the nineteenth century as a name for the mistletoe in parts of the British Isles and in Brittany.<sup>575</sup> In the German region of Holstein, Frazer states that mistletoe found in oak trees was thought to be a cure for fresh wounds and a charm that could assure good hunting results. The French of Lacaune believed that the mistletoe was an antidote to any poison if it was made into a decoction and drunk or laid on the stomach of the sufferer. In Sweden it was believed that mistletoe functioned as a cure all if a sprig of it was hung around a person’s neck or a ring of it was worn on a finger. Frazer states that the Swedes also believed that epilepsy could be prevented by carrying about on one’s person a knife with a handle made from an oak tree that had had mistletoe growing in it. The Germans also believed that epilepsy could be prevented in children if they had mistletoe hung around their necks, and the French of Bourbonnais thought they could prevent it with a decoction of mistletoe and rye flour, provided the mistletoe had been gathered from an oak tree on St. John’s Day (Midsummer). People in Bottesford, Lincolnshire believed the

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<sup>573</sup> This cutting method of removal seems to contradict the stone throwing method listed prior.

Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 86.

<sup>574</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 84.

<sup>575</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 82.

same as the French, but did not specify the need for flour or a specific time for the collection of the plant.<sup>576</sup>

It must be noted that Frazer does acknowledge that despite the obvious survival of a belief in the healing powers of mistletoe, nineteenth-century science could find no medicinal value in the plant.<sup>577</sup> Also, in contrast to the evidence presented by Frazer regarding fire festivals, the Nordic countries are much better documented regarding their beliefs in magical plants and specifically the mistletoe. However, the inclusion of numerous Swedish examples is something of a double-edged sword for Frazer. It gives credence to his arguments concerning a Golden Bough ceremony in Scandinavia, but the absence of similar references to Danish, Icelandic or Norwegian practices is noticeable. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that while there may have been Norwegian influences on the Icelandic form of the Baldr myth that have survived to modern times, there is little suggestion that there was Swedish influence.<sup>578</sup> Therefore, using only Swedish examples as the basis of Norse customs is questionable at best.

A significant number of examples showing how Edward Tylor's idea of survivals influenced Frazer's thinking have been presented. This is not to say that *The Golden Bough* is not full of examples that support William Smith's methodology as well, just that Frazer's interpretations of evidence concerning Baldr and festivals has shown only marginal traces of Smith. This changes when Frazer begins to try to tie together all of the small and large facets so far discussed. He states that:

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<sup>576</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 83-84.

<sup>577</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 84.

<sup>578</sup> The merits of this question will be taken up in the examination of Bertha Phillpotts below.

the myth of Balder's death was not merely a myth, that is, a description of physical phenomena in imagery borrowed from human life, but that it was at the same time the story which people told to explain why they annually burned a human representative of the god and cut the mistletoe with solemn ceremony [...] the story of Balder's tragic end formed, so to say, the text of the sacred drama which was acted year by year as a magical rite to cause the sun to shine, trees to grow, crops to thrive, and to guard man and beast from the baleful arts of fairies and trolls, of witches and warlocks. The tale belonged, in short, to that class of nature myths which are meant to be supplemented by ritual; here, as so often, myth stood to magic in the relation of theory to practice.<sup>579</sup>

From his own admission, it is without doubt that Smith and his theories were a major influence on Frazer. But it should not be assumed that this explanation of the Baldr myth is totally congruent with Smith's theories. As seen earlier, Smith was a firm proponent of the primacy of ritual. Here, Frazer is indeed arguing that the ritual associated with Baldr's death was connected with the myth narrative that has been preserved about it. However, unlike Smith, Frazer is not willing to state categorically that the performance of the ritual is the only thing that is actually important. Nor did he think 'why' a narrative was performed was a mere superfluous ornament, as did Smith.

Frazer, in his indefatigable way, is still not quite ready to conclude his exploration of certain aspects of the Baldr narrative after his presentation of the myriad removal methods and healing properties of the mistletoe. Next he addresses the frequent references made to the oak tree, already evidenced in the cultures which prized the mistletoe, followed by an examination of instances where someone or something is able to keep its life force, or soul, in a place external to its physical body.

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<sup>579</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 88.

## Trees and the Oak

Baldr, according to Frazer, must have been considered the tree or vegetation deity who was sacrificed in order to assure the fertility of crops, and the health and safety of man and beast.<sup>580</sup> The idea that plants or trees are essential to life is both too general and too abstract for primitive peoples; they would need a specific tree that was sacred for a specific reason to express the important role vegetation plays in human society.<sup>581</sup> Frazer concluded that for the ‘Aryan’ people who settled Europe, the tangible, natural object that could illustrate this point was none other than the tree, and in many specific instances the oak. Naturally, Frazer marshalls a multitude of examples to prove his point, devoting fifty pages to the worship of trees in the very beginning of the second volume of *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings* section of *The Golden Bough*.<sup>582</sup> Much later he addresses the topic of the oak specifically and in detail.

Frazer’s first step is to establish that the ancient Romans saw Jupiter as a god of four things, the sky, the rain, the thunder, and the oak, all of which shared a characteristic relating to fertility. His objective was to demonstrate that in an understanding of the workings of the characteristics associated with fertility, it was the interplay of connections to the oak tree that was most important. He argued that this principle could be applied to all of primitive Europe by identifying the ‘Aryan’ cultures that worshipped the same type of god, with the same characteristics, but simply under different names.<sup>583</sup> In this way, he thought in the reverse of Müller.

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<sup>580</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 88-89.

<sup>581</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 89.

<sup>582</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 7-58.

<sup>583</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 349.

The names were the only things that set them apart, rather than joining them together.

Frazer argued that primeval Europe was covered with vast forests and that within them the oak was the most prolific and useful of the trees. He felt that proof of this could be found in three sources. The first was the remains of trees that have been preserved in peat bogs around Europe; second was the remains of pile villages in European lakes; and finally the evidence that exists in the texts of Europe's earliest writers.

Peat bogs are important because their acidic environment provides a perfect medium for the preservation of organic material. Frazer was convinced that the trees that had been preserved in these bogs offered important evidence of the early days of Europe. In Hatfield Moss, Yorkshire, oak trunks of over 100 feet in length had been found, one measuring 120 feet long and twelve feet in diameter. Frazer cites a similar French story of a bog near Abbeville where a trunk was discovered that was fourteen feet thick. In Ireland, bog finds suggested that there had been oaks of over 400 feet in height there and there was also evidence of an early road system that used oak timber as its base.<sup>584</sup>

Scandinavia's bog finds are a different matter, however. In Denmark, Frazer argued that a specific layer within the bogs suggest that, though the country is now filled mostly with beech trees, it was once densely covered with oak. He suggests that this type of tree must have been in use during the Danish Bronze Age because preserved bronze items had been found in the same layer as the oak trees.<sup>585</sup>

Norway and Sweden tell an altogether different story. Frazer tells us that the bogs in both of those countries suggest two different botanical eras. The lower, or older,

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<sup>584</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 350-351.

<sup>585</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 351-352.

layer is often of deciduous hardwood trees, the oak among them. The second, younger layer is comprised of conifers such as the Scotch pine and deciduous softwood trees like the beeches and birches that cover most of mainland Scandinavia today. The problem is, and Frazer himself admits this, there is no evidence that northern Scandinavia was inhabited during the time of the first bog layer. There may have been vast forests of oak trees across Norway and Sweden, but there was no one there to see, or more importantly worship, them.<sup>586</sup> Similar to what we learned in previous sections, no mention is made of Iceland, despite its unique history with timber and its scarcity.<sup>587</sup> Frazer appears to take for granted that the myths preserved in the Icelandic language do not reflect Icelandic culture but rather their pre-colonisation European heritage.

The Irish roadways mentioned above are a good example of people putting oak timber to use, but they are not the only example. The European lakes served as almost as good a preservation medium of natural material as the peat bogs. In the British Isles, Frazer argues that some early peoples would build their houses actually on the water of lakes. They were kept above the surface by a series of thick poles that supported the floors and were made mainly from oak, with some fir or birch. However in Switzerland and other parts of central Europe, Frazer states that houses were made from a whole host of materials such as oak, fir, birch, alder, ash and elm. In the Italian Po valley, elm was the prevailing wood choice.<sup>588</sup> Finally, Frazer states that the lakes of Scotland and Ireland have also revealed that the people in those

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<sup>586</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 352.

<sup>587</sup> It should be noted that oak trees never grew on Iceland. The birch was by far the most common tree, but the deforestation that resulted from human settlement crippled the sustainability of Icelandic forests. We can see examples of this in *Vápnfirðinga Saga* where Þord and Þormod disagree over tree-cutting rights. Also see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 32-34 for a general introduction to the resource shortages during the settlement of Iceland.

<sup>588</sup> For Frazer's general argument, surely the use of elm instead of oak by the Italians, who developed the Grove of Nemi narrative, hampers Frazer's general goal.



regions would make canoes out of hollowed out oak trunks in order to cross the water.<sup>589</sup>

Frazer is somewhat handicapped when he tries to use early writers to document the extensive use of the oak in ancient European society because of the scarcity of surviving records. He starts with the Greek writer Strabo, who wrote at the beginning of the Common Era. According to Strabo, the Veneti on the coast of Brittany made their boats out of oak, the most abundant wood in their area. He also noted that oak woods were interspersed among the olive groves and vineyards of central Italy.<sup>590</sup> Another Greek, Polybius, writing roughly 200 years earlier, stated that in the Po valley, mentioned above, the oak forests were so common that their acorns made these forest a favourite feeding ground for pigs. Not surprisingly, he says that the Po valley supplied most of Italy with pork. This pattern of pigs in oak forests was also repeated, Polybius claimed, along the coasts of Tuscany and Lombardy.<sup>591</sup> A final Greek writer, Pausanias, identified that ‘in the second century after Christ the oak forests of Arcadia still harboured wild boars, bears, and huge tortoises in their dark recesses’.<sup>592</sup> And Frazer once again recounts evidence provided by Pliny who claimed that the whole of Germany was covered in dense forests and that within these forests, the oaks were the grandest: ‘So huge were the trees, he says, that when their roots met they were forced up above ground in the shape of arches, through which a troop of horses could ride as through an open gate.’<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 352-353.

<sup>590</sup> *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. by H.C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, 3 vols. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), I, p. 291.

<sup>591</sup> *Polybius: The Histories*, trans. by W.R. Paton, 6 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1922), I, p. 277.

<sup>592</sup> *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, trans. by J.G. Frazer, 6 vols (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1965), I, p. 402.

<sup>593</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 354-355; *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. by John Bostock and H.T. Riley, (London: Henry Bohn, 1855), III, p. 341.

Frazer even extends Tylor's concept of survivals to the oak forests, rationalizing that if the forests remain to the present day, they must have always been there. 'Thus we are told that among the leaf-bearing trees of Greece [...] the oak still plays by far the most important part in regard both to the number of the individuals and the number of the species. And the British oak in particular is yet the prevailing tree in most of the woods of France, Germany and southern Russia.'<sup>594</sup>

Finally, Frazer argues that the last connection the European peoples had to the oak is the use of acorns. We saw above how the Italians would feed their swine herds off of this nut, but humans used it as a source of food as well. Frazer points out that Hesiod claimed in his *Works and Days* that the oak acorns were a source of plentiful sustenance,<sup>595</sup> and Pausanias wrote that the Arcadians would survive off the acorns of specific oak trees in their forests.<sup>596</sup> In Spain, Strabo claimed that mountaineers would live off bread made from acorns for large parts of the year, and Pliny added that acorns were served as the second course at meals of the upper class.<sup>597</sup> Frazer supplies the information that for the English and the French they were used as a last resort substitute for bread when times were tough, though as has become a common occurrence, exactly when times were tough he does not specify. In Spain and Greece, the eating of acorns lived on until Frazer's time period and he claimed that the practice of feeding swine on them survived across Europe.<sup>598</sup>

Having established the utility of the oak tree to European peoples, Frazer's next step was to show its worship, even taken to the extreme, its deification. Taking into consideration all the things people used the oak for, Frazer felt that it is 'no

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<sup>594</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 355.

<sup>595</sup> Hesiod, trans. by Evelyn-White, p. 21.

<sup>596</sup> Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, trans. by Frazer, I, p. 374.

<sup>597</sup> *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. by Hamilton, p. 232. *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. by Bostock, p. 345.

<sup>598</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, pp. 355-356.

wonder, then, if the tree from which they received so many benefits should play an important part in their religion, and should be invested with a sacred character.’<sup>599</sup>

To prove his point, he examined various cultures that had a thunder, sky, rain or fertility deity and attempted to show how they were connected with the oak tree.

Frazer began in Greece with the god Zeus, who had a sanctuary in Dodona (near the middle of the mainland) and who ‘was revered in the oracular oak’.<sup>600</sup> In the region of Boeotia, where Thebes was located, Frazer states that the people considered Zeus’ wife, Hera, as an oak goddess, and the Arcadians of Mount Lycaeus would pray to Zeus for rain by dipping an oak branch into a sacred spring. Frazer provided many examples of how Zeus was connected with the rain, thunder and lightning, without the additional criteria of a link to the oak tree, and he did this in order to setup connections with the deities of other cultures. He noted that as the Italians assimilated the Greek religion, the character of Jupiter (who took Zeus’ place) also was connected to the oak: Virgil tells us that ‘in ancient Italy every oak was sacred to Jupiter.’<sup>601</sup> Moving further north, but still relying on Italian writers, Frazer states that the Celts of Gaul ‘chose groves of oaks for the scene of their solemn service and they performed none of their rites without oak leaves’<sup>602</sup>; furthermore, ‘the Celtic image of Zeus is a tall oak’.<sup>603</sup> Frazer believed the feature of sacred oak groves was also prevalent amongst early Germans and cites Grimm who argued that ‘the chief of their holy trees was the oak. It appears to have been

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<sup>599</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 357.

<sup>600</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 358.

<sup>601</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 361; *Virgil’s Works*, trans. by J.W. MacKail (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p.331.

<sup>602</sup> *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. by Bostock, III, p. 341.

<sup>603</sup> *The Dissertations of Maximus Tyrius*, trans. by Thomas Taylor, 2 vols (London: C. Whittingham, 1804), I, p. 194.

especially dedicated to the god of thunder, Donar or Thunar, the equivalent of the Norse Thor.<sup>604</sup>

Although there are a handful of other examples, much of Frazer's later arguments in *The Golden Bough* relating to Scandinavia will rely on this section concerning the characteristics of Zeus (Jupiter) and Þórr (or his Germanic equivalent). Yet Frazer's only connection for this amalgamated thunder-deity and the oak tree was an eighth-century sacred tree from the German region of Hesse that 'went among the heathen by the name of Jupiter's oak (*robur Jovis*) which in old German would be *Donares eih*, "the oak of Donar"'.<sup>605</sup> However, the connections concerning weather and fertility are more numerous. Frazer cited Adam of Bremen's statement that 'Thor presides in the air; he it is who rules thunder and lightning, wind and rains, fine weather and crops', claiming also that at the Uppsala temple Þórr was the principal deity. At this temple, he says, was a sacred grove with a great tree where human and animal sacrifices would take place.<sup>606</sup>

Frazer states that the Slavs of Novgorod worshipped a thunder god called Perun for whom they kept a fire of oak wood burning day and night. If it ever went out, those charged with its maintenance were killed. Frazer found that a similar fire vigil existed among the Lithuanians for their god Perkunas; however if their fire went out, they simply would relight it via the friction caused by rubbing two oak sticks together. Frazer reasoned that Perkunas must also have been a rain deity because when the people suffered from drought, they would carry a bowl of beer around the fire three times and then pour it onto the fire while praying for showers. The exact same ritual, during times of drought, was known to occur among the

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<sup>604</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 363-364.

<sup>605</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 364.

<sup>606</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 364. However he refrains from here suggesting that it was an oak tree. Perhaps since Adam of Bremen notes that the tree was green in both summer and winter, a characteristic the deciduous oak does not share.

neighbouring Estonians, who would also smear their oak trees with animal blood at least once a year and sacrifice animals to their thunder god, Taara, to secure good crops.<sup>607</sup>

As with all other aspects of his arguments, it was important for Frazer to demonstrate that worship of the oak is something that has permeated European society, thus it was not unexpected that he saw survivals of this in his own time. In parts of France and Germany, he said there were oak trees still worshipped despite the Christian community's best efforts to absorb the practice by associating the trees with saints. In other parts of Germany, sick people were led through openings in the trunks of oaks in order to heal them, and in Minden a specific oak was danced around on Easter Saturday celebrations. In Ragnit there stood an oak that people held as sacred and 'any person who harmed it would be visited with misfortune, especially with some bodily ailment'.<sup>608</sup>

Though Frazer provides a number of specifically Norse examples in this section, he seems to have overlooked at least one very strong piece of support. In the *Völsungasaga*, a partial inspiration for Wagner's Ring Cycle, it is said that in the hall of King Völsungr there stood a magnificent tree that was called 'barnstokkr'. One evening, during the wedding feast for the King's daughter, Signý, and a man named Siggeirr, an old man came into the hall and plunged a sword into the barnstokkr and only the King's youngest son, Sigmundr, could pull it out. Siggeirr was very jealous and as the story unfolds, he captures Sigmundr, his sword, all his brothers and the Völsungr kingdom. The brothers were taken to a forest and tied to trees where a beast would come to devour them. Sigmundr, however, was able to escape and plan his revenge. Captured yet again, Sigmundr escapes again, this time with the help of

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<sup>607</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 365-368.

<sup>608</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I, II, p. 371.

his recovered sword. He then sets fire to Siggeirr's hall and escapes to take up residence in his ancestral home under the barnstokkr.

What type of tree the barnstokkr has been the source of continuing debate. In the text, it reads: 'en nú stendr sjá inn mikli apaldr í miðri hollinni, sem fyrr car nefndr', which R.G. Finch has translated to mean 'and as was mentioned before, the great apple-tree stood there in the middle of the hall'.<sup>609</sup> This appears relatively definitive, with 'apaldr' meaning apple-tree, however, as noted previously, the apple tree was not indigenous to Scandinavia.<sup>610</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that other scholars, such as H.A. Guerber, believe that the barnstokkr was in fact an oak tree.<sup>611</sup> Regardless of the type of tree it was, the story is quite clear about the ties the ruling family had to it. It could easily classify as a type of totem, especially considering the narrative importance of the sword that is pulled from it.

Unfortunately, there is no suggestion of this in Frazer's analysis.

With this section, Frazer felt that he had demonstrated the importance of the oak to the early Europeans, and in previous sections, that he had identified the healing powers and special ceremonies that were associated with magical plants and the mistletoe specifically. All that remained, in Frazer's mind, was to explain the link between the oak tree and the mistletoe, which he did by arguing that the mistletoe was seen by primitive people as the life force of the oak.<sup>612</sup> It is the Baldr myth which provides the final piece to the puzzle explaining why oak mistletoe must be removed. In order to burn the oak, which was used to fuel the Midsummer fire,

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<sup>609</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. by R.G. Finch (London: Thomas Nelson Printers, 1965), pp. 4-5.

<sup>610</sup> See page 83.

<sup>611</sup> Though he does not explain why he chose the oak, one can assume that he, like Turville-Petre held that 'apli' meant 'nut' and therefore the nut tree was an oak. H.A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen: From the Eddas and Sagas* (New York: Dover, 1992), pp. 253-254.

<sup>612</sup> What Frazer did not account for was the frequent references to the Ash tree in Old Norse narratives as seen on page 156. For a critique of this oversight by nineteenth century scholars in general, see Lois Bragg, *Oedipus borealis* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), p.110.

the mistletoe had to be removed first. Frazer argued that as long as the mistletoe was on the oak, the oak was considered invulnerable, much like Baldr. It was not too difficult to imagine the mistletoe as the seat of life for the oak, he thought, since the deciduous oak loses its green foliage in the winter yet the mistletoe remains green year round. He states: 'in winter the sight of its fresh foliage among the bare branches must have been hailed by the worshippers of the tree as a sign that the divine life which had ceased to animate the branches yet survived in the mistletoe, as the heart of a sleeper still beats when his body is motionless.'<sup>613</sup> From this idea, Frazer proceeds to the final section of *The Golden Bough*, where he undertakes an examination of how the life force, or soul, of an object can be kept external from its body.

### **External Souls**

As one may have come to expect, Frazer was able to list countless examples of folktales where a character kept his life force or soul separate from his actual body. Almost two hundred pages of documentation are provided, during which he argues that this idea of an external soul was not a 'mere figment devised to adorn a tale, but ... a real article of primitive faith, which has given rise to a corresponding set of customs'.<sup>614</sup> He also gives examples of tales where this external soul was kept in inanimate objects, animals, and more directly relevant to this study, plants. There is no need to include a comprehensive survey of all his citations, a summary of the main points will suffice.

Frazer provides a strong example of this concept from the collected fairytales of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen. He quotes: 'in the Norse tale of "the giant who had no

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<sup>613</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 93.

<sup>614</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, Chapter X generally and specifically p. 119.

heart in his body,” the giant tells the captive princess: “Far, far away in a lake lies an island, on that island stands a church, in that church is a well, in that well swims a duck, in that duck there is an egg, and in that egg there lies my heart.”” The hero of the story eventually finds the egg and breaks it, which causes the giant to die.<sup>615</sup>

This theme is quite common across Europe. Frazer cites similar tales, such as in Denmark where a warlock’s heart is kept in an egg that is in a duck that is in a hare that is in a dragon which is in a lake in Poland. In Germany, a witch’s life force was contained in an egg that was in a duck that was in a pond that was in a mountain, and in Russia there was a different warlock’s soul that was in a worm that resided under an oak tree. The use of an egg as the symbol of what was used to hide the essential spirit of a creature’s life is repeated over and over; in fact, it provides the medium for Frazer’s only Icelandic reference in this entire section when he cites an example, similar to the ones above, where the shared life force of two giantesses was kept within an egg.<sup>616</sup>

Sometimes the egg could be a double-edged sword, as Frazer shows in the story of a wicked Italian fairy who asks her would-be slayer: ‘Do you see that mountain far off there? On that mountain is a tigress with seven heads. If you wish me to die, a lion must fight that tigress and tear off all seven of her heads. In her body is an egg, and if any one hits me with it in the middle of my forehead, I shall die; but if that egg falls into my hands, the tigress will come to life again, resume her seven heads, and I shall live.’<sup>617</sup> It is actually quite surprising that Frazer does not make a direct parallel here to Baldr and the mistletoe. Instead, he merely relates the story and then moves on to the next example.

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<sup>615</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 119-120.

<sup>616</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, pp. 108-125.

<sup>617</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 107.



One cannot help but think this was a missed opportunity, because this particular tale would have been a perfect demonstration of Frazer's whole thesis. The egg is the fairy's life-force; it is what keeps her perpetually alive. In this way, she is exactly like the invulnerable Baldr. Also like Baldr, it is only this exact item that can cause her death, thus the egg is her mistletoe. This oversight is an example of what plagued Frazer throughout *The Golden Bough*. His desire to be as thorough and comprehensive as possible, with the innumerable listing of tales that appear similar, overwhelms him to the point he misses opportunities to explain the potential connections between all his evidence. In the process, he also loses the reader and the theme of his argument in an ocean of examples.

As for placing one's soul or life within a tree or plant, rather than an egg, Frazer's examples are somewhat different. Here one often sees that when a person's life was tied to a tree, the state of their being was reflected in the state of the tree. In the area of the Gaboon in Africa, for instance, 'the life of each of the children is believed to be bound up with the life of one of the trees; and if the tree dies or is thrown down, they are sure that the child will soon die.'<sup>618</sup> A similar practice exists across Europe where families in parts of Russia, Germany, England, France and Italy will 'plant a tree at the birth of a child. The tree, it is hoped, will grow with the child, and it is tended with special care.'<sup>619</sup>

### *The Baldr Component & General Critique of Frazer*

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<sup>618</sup> Frazer also claims this practice is common place among the Papuans, Maoris, Fijians and Dyaks. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 160-163.

<sup>619</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 165. Though Frazer could not be aware of it, any child or parent from the 1960s onwards should recognize that a survival of this appears in the enormously popular children's story, *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, which tells the tale of a boy and tree tied together throughout their lives.

By establishing the persistence of the belief that a soul can be stored externally to one's body, Frazer finally thinks he has all of the pieces to demonstrate that the components of the Baldr myth have parallels in the ritual drama enacted at the Grove of Nemi. He believes that Baldr in Scandinavia was like the king of an oak grove in Italy. He, like the priest of Nemi, was a personification of the oak spirit that the early Europeans worshipped. So, too, like the Italian priest, Baldr could only be killed with a golden bough, which in his case was the mistletoe.<sup>620</sup> Because he was killed, Frazer would have one assume that Baldr's ability to provide fertility to the grove and worshippers there had failed. This could account for the fact that after his death, he was ritually burned, an event that continued with modifications into modern Europe. The fact that the surviving documentation for European fire festivals also suggests strong connections to fertility reinforces Frazer's argument about this ritual drama.

This is Frazer's argument. The degree of its validity must still be determined. It was noted earlier that Frazer was aware of the main sources for the Baldr narrative, however a characteristic of his analysis that cannot be overlooked is the very narrow approach he takes regarding his use of the myth. For his argument, the only parts of the narrative that are important are the following facts: Baldr was an invulnerable character; he could only be harmed by the mistletoe; and after he died, he was burned on a pyre. Frazer makes no comment on the prominent roles Frigg and Loki play in the course of events leading to Baldr's death, nor does he address any possible significance to the fact that Snorri is the only one who relays this information to us. As A.H. Krappe points out, Hǫðr likewise receives little attention, even though he would seem to provide a perfect example of the one who

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<sup>620</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, VII, II, p. 285.

replaces the current king of the wood.<sup>621</sup> Finally, since the king of the wood is clearly connected to the concept of resurrection, why does Frazer ignore the fact that the gods make considerable effort to bring Baldr back to life, something which eventually happens after the events of Ragnarøk?

Aside from his neglect of the majority of the details of the Baldr narrative as it has survived, the most damaging critique to which Frazer is vulnerable is his use of sources. There are two issues here: first, a general critique of what plagues all of Frazer's scholarship in *The Golden Bough*; and then a more specific concern regarding his evaluation of Nordic material. The first problem is that Frazer consistently drops examples of cultural practices into his arguments as a method of supporting them, but he does so without explaining the context in which these practices occur. Often this problem is exacerbated by the fact that not even a rough date is possible to ascertain. The second problem is that when Frazer is arguing that a tradition exists among European peoples, he simply does not provide sufficient Nordic examples of those traditions to warrant the extension of his broad general conclusions to those northern regions. Other than very isolated, random examples from Norway and Denmark, most of Frazer's Nordic examples come from Sweden, and these are by no means numerous. He relies much more heavily on British, French and German examples to make his arguments. If Baldr's funeral pyre was meant to be a ritual drama that reflected the early tradition of European fertility festivals, then Frazer needs to provide many more examples from the Nordic countries, especially from Norway and Iceland where the narrative was likely developed. Supporting evidence could fairly easily have been provided from

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<sup>621</sup> A.H. Krappe, 'The Myth of Balder: A Study in Comparative Mythology', *Folklore*, vol. 34 (1923), p. 185.

references to Old Norse material that was readily available to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century British scholar. Frazer simply does not do it.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

Much of this chapter is an extension of the one that preceded it. In fact, Smith could probably have been grouped together with Lang and Tylor as one of the scholars who had a formative influence on Frazer. But Smith was more than that; he had a direct influence on Frazer and on the scholars that will be considered in the final chapter of this study. The primary focus for both Frazer and Smith was the observance, and more importantly the performance, of rituals. Smith's particular contribution to the study of myth was paradoxically to suggest that it was not nearly as important as we might make it out to be. Myths were necessarily tied to ritual practices, so they were unavoidable if one was interested in the study of rituals, but Smith introduced the idea that it was only the actual ritual practices that were important to a functioning society, not the narratives used to explain them.

Therefore, in *Vafþrúðnismál* one should not focus on the explanations of the natural world and use comparative examples from other cultures to draw conclusions about the state of Old Norse society. Instead, the form of the ritual contained within the poem is what should be analyzed. The only conclusion Smith would draw from *Vafþrúðnismál* is that the Old Norse society had a tradition of deadly wisdom poems, perhaps tied to struggles for leadership.

The problems for Smith are similar to those encountered by previous scholars. Accepting his position means disarding large parts of the poem narratives as superfluous information. In trying to reduce *Vafþrúðnismál* to its constituent parts, Smith loses much that informed the poet's art when he was crafting it.

Furthermore, Smith had no answer for the question that plagues so many scholars regarding how the first ritual came to take place. If *Vafþrúðnismál* was indeed a sign of a practice among the Norse, how or why did the tradition of wisdom contests come about? While it might be too much to expect an answer to such questions to be contained within every poem that is an example of any given tradition, surely anyone interested in ritual practices must at some point wonder about their beginnings.

Frazer's work was essentially the culmination and exposition of the methodological approaches of the previous three scholars. His goal for *The Golden Bough* was to demonstrate that there had existed a belief among early Europeans that certain kings controlled the fertility of their lands, and that a complex series of rituals surrounded these kings. The myth of Baldr was an example of a myth that arose, as Smith would argue, after the ritual had long been established as a way to explain the ritual. But at the same time, this myth was an example of what Tylor identified as a survival because it provided a window to an ancient society. In order to argue his point, Frazer used a library of comparative examples from nineteenth century primitive cultures as well as earlier European cultures, to demonstrate, as had both Lang and Tylor previously, that this belief was one common to all early cultures.

The problem with this comparative approach was that it turned Frazer, like Lang before him, into a sampler. He extracted examples from cultures without proper consideration of all the secondary factors that might surround that particular example. Furthermore, though Frazer appeared to place primary focus on Baldr and the Norse culture, very little of his supporting evidence concerned either. This could be a mere oversight since supporting examples would have been fairly easy to find, but considering how seemingly exhaustive Frazer was in the number of examples he gave, the omission of Norse material is troubling.

Finally, Frazer like Smith had no satisfactory answer to the question of how his King of the Wood figure initially came about. It did not seem to interest either one. So we are left to ask, what prompted Frazer's hypothetical European society to elevate one person and invest him with responsibility to safeguard that society's fertility? In the following and last chapter, answers to those questions will be addressed.

## Chapter Four:

### *Dramatic Origins*

In this final chapter the focus will be on a group of scholars, working in the early part of the twentieth century, who argued for drama as the origin of myth. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first is an examination of the scholars who popularized this method of thinking, a group now referred to as the Cambridge Ritualists. They were A.B. Cook, Francis Cornford, Gilbert Murray and Jane Ellen Harrison. In the interests of space and relevance to Old Norse, only the latter three will be examined here. The central idea they collectively put forward was that early cultures performed ritual worship of a year-spirit, a kind of deity whose life story reflected the seasons of the year, a concept very close to Frazer's vegetation spirit from *The Golden Bough*. These rituals eventually formed into dramatic recreations, what might loosely be called theatre, and the narratives told about these recreations were the first myths. The second part of the chapter will be an examination of the Old Norse scholar Bertha Phillpotts. Though she was certainly influenced by the Ritualists, her scholarship had a more constrained focus. She argued that the written poems contained in the *Poetic Edda* had a prior state where they were enacted dramas and that a close examination of the written poems would reveal indications of this.

As was the case in earlier parts of this study, in this chapter the Baldr narratives as well as the poem *Skírnismál* will receive particular attention. These primary examples of Old Norse mythic narratives will be augmented with a number of other narratives that have been highlighted in brief. The Baldr narratives will provide an Old Norse example supporting the Ritualists' theories, while *Skírnismál*

is potentially the strongest evidence supporting Phillpotts's argument for dramatic origin. However, in order to gain a clear understanding of the new ideas being put forward by these scholars, concerning the beginnings of drama as well as the established opinions they were building upon, the contexts provided by the two very different universities that influenced them and their predecessors needs to be understood.

## **Post-Victorian Oxbridge**

### *The Academic Climate*

As mentioned in the general introduction to this study, it is an unintended coincidence that all of the scholars examined throughout were members of either Cambridge or Oxford. This did not form as common a bond as one might think, however, since the two universities were heading in very different directions regarding the study of myth. Though there is little doubt that the theories of Müller have very little credibility today, during his life he was a massive influence on how Oxford studied and taught linguistics and classics. Lang may have put it best in the first sentence of *Modern Mythology* when he wrote: 'between 1860 and 1880, roughly speaking, English people interested in early myths and religions found the mythological theories of Professor Max Müller in possession of the field.'<sup>622</sup> Müller's philological approach to myth and the study of the ancient world in general was the norm at Oxford during the timeline of most of this investigation.

Cambridge, however, had taken a broader approach, incorporating archaeology and anthropology into the scholastic debate over the importance of

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<sup>622</sup> Andrew Lang, *Modern Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), p. 1.



mythology.<sup>623</sup> A brief preview of the first scholar to be considered in this chapter, Jane Ellen Harrison, will provide some insight.

In the first chapter, it was shown that Max Müller based his arguments solely on comparative textual analysis, arguing that through careful etymological examination of how a myth was recorded one could glimpse what the mythmaker's world was like. In the second and third chapters, the comparative approach continued. However instead of engaging in a pure etymological analysis, scholars like Lang and Frazer chose to incorporate anthropological data that was coming to light as a result of 19<sup>th</sup> century European research. All of these previous scholars had been attempting to explain how mankind came to create myths. By definition, however, myths are the narrative accounts of the action of the gods and not human beings so their stories offer limited explicit information about the people responsible for their production. For instance, few facts are given of the day to day activities of the average human being. Harrison expanded the cache of resource material that would provide this information by insisting that evidence from archaeological finds should be incorporated into scholars' analyses as these extant remains were direct creations of the culture that produced the myths. They were still subject to interpretation, but did not suffer the rigors of time and transmission in the same way as narratives.

While it is true that many of Harrison's arguments were based entirely around a single archaeological find, a hymn on a stone slab, the differences in the scholarly approach she took to evidence are significant. Where Müller would have only interpreted the words of the hymn found on the stone slab, Harrison felt that it was essential also to take into account the context of where the hymn was found and

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<sup>623</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, p. 92.

the history of the surrounding area. Her scholarship is therefore filled with drawings and photographs of mythological depictions, as well as diagrams of where and how items were found.<sup>624</sup> Archaeological data heavily influences her conclusions and its necessary inclusion in myth analysis would set the standard for scholarship that followed after hers.

As was the case at Oxford, Cambridge too had a preeminent scholar influencing these disciplines. Before the Ritualists, the leading Cambridge scholar in the field of classics was William Ridgeway (August 1858 – August 1926). He was very active in the scholarly community, responsible for establishing the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies in 1879, the British School at Athens in 1886, and in 1892 he was appointed the Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge. However, instead of being a leader and source of positive inspiration, Ridgeway became more of an adversary for the later Cambridge scholars.

Concerning the origins of drama and ritual, Ridgeway was convinced that drama's origin in Greece had nothing to do with a veneration of a vegetation spirit, as Frazer had argued. Instead, he felt that drama was based on funerary rituals, or dances performed around the tombs of dead heroes in order to appease the dead spirits.<sup>625</sup>

Tragedy arose from the worship of the dead, and not from that of Dionysus;  
that as Dionysus himself had almost certainly once been only a Thracian hero,  
even if it were true that Tragedy had risen from his cult, its real ultimate  
origin would still be in the worship of the dead; and that dramatic

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<sup>624</sup> See Jane Ellen Harrison, *Mythology* (New York: Harbinger, 1924) for examples of her deconstruction of specific Greek deities and their origins and her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1911) for an example of blending comparative anthropology and classical archaeology.

<sup>625</sup> Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, p. 127

representations in honour of gods, such as those at Eleusis, were simply an extension of the method of propitiating dead ancestors to secure the favour of the great divinities.<sup>626</sup>

Ridgeway argued that dramatic rituals evolved into more show than ritual when the ritual was moved away from the tomb and into a migrating performance, such as Thespis of Icaria's travelling wagon.<sup>627</sup> The Ridgeway interpretation was the current standard that the scholars of this chapter worked with, against or around. However, there was a much earlier standard that must be briefly examined in order to understand the theories of this chapter, and that standard belonged to Aristotle.

### *Aristotle's Origin of Drama*

Many of the theories found later in this chapter are in some way related to perhaps the earliest explanation of the origins of drama, those contained in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle worked from the premise that both tragedy and comedy began as mere improvisation. Tragedy resulted from improvising on hymns to the god Dionysus, or *Dithyrambs*, and comedy came from improvisation upon phallic songs. However, for Aristotle the over-arching component of all drama was imitation of action:

Life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character.<sup>628</sup>

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<sup>626</sup> William Ridgeway, *Origin of Tragedy* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 93.

<sup>627</sup> Ridgeway, *Origin of Tragedy*, pp. 58-62.

<sup>628</sup> S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), p. 27.

Thus, *why* a character commits an action is of an altogether secondary importance to the actual execution of the action, a view very similar to that of Smith.

Aristotle argued that comedy occurred when characters imitated actions that were meant to be blunders or grotesque but not have a component of pain or sorrow. Tragedy relied more on the sequence of action. 'Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy.'<sup>629</sup> However, he also provided for the method with which these actions could be retold. 'Some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song.'<sup>630</sup> Therefore in a tragedy, one could expect to find dialogue that is meant to be spoken and/or sung.

Festivals were the occasions where these performances took place, and all of them were centered in Athens and most were in the very early spring. The major 'City Dionysia' festival occurred in March after the harsh winter weather had passed, however other smaller festivals preceded it. The 'Lenaea' would have taken place earlier around January when agricultural work was at a minimum, and the 'Anthesteria' or wine festival occurred in February. Each festival would last a proscribed number of days with different types of drama performed in both competitive and non-competitive settings on specific days.<sup>631</sup>

What is most important to this study was Aristotle's belief that the heart of tragedy was a reliance on plot, and that of comedy was character development. Upon these two principles, the Ritualists based much of their scholarship. And while they owed much to these Aristotelian arguments in forming their own theories, the ancient arguments also contributed to their undoing.

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<sup>629</sup> Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>630</sup> S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry*, p. 23.

<sup>631</sup> See Rush Rehm, 'Festivals and audience in Athens and Rome', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 184-201 for a comprehensive explanation of the festival season and procedures.

## **The Cambridge Ritualists**

### *Jane Ellen Harrison*

Jane Ellen Harrison was born on Sept. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1850 in Cottingham, Yorkshire and before her death in April of 1928 she published dozens of works. Her influence on the study of myth is seen by her biographers as occurring in two parts. First, as previewed above, she was one of the driving forces in the practice of moving past a purely literary approach in arguing for the validity of incorporating archaeological artifacts into one's theories. This is directly attributable to the fact that her most important myth scholarship was based on evidence unearthed in an archaeological find. Second, like Smith and the Cambridge scholars who were attracted to her scholarship, she was a firm believer in the primacy of ritual over myth.<sup>632</sup> The idea that a given culture had first a ritual that then led to narrative myths is not a new one, but what set Harrison apart from many previous scholars was that she also concerned herself with what caused the original ritual to come about. As with Müller's poetic 'Aryan' mythmaker, in the end there was no actual proof for her theories, only supposition.

Harrison believed that myths were derived from the veneration of a figure she called the *Eniautos-Daimon* or 'Year Spirit'.<sup>633</sup> Her background area of speciality was Greek mythology, and she argued that this theoretical figure lay behind all of the mythological tales of ancient Greece. The *Eniautos-Daimon* (or *E-D* from here on) should not be thought of as a typical anthropomorphic, mythological 'god' like

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<sup>632</sup> See Annabel Robinson, *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) for a complete biography.

<sup>633</sup> As mentioned above, this created term was an evolution of Frazer's 'Tree/Corn/Vegetation Spirit' idea. Harrison felt a term was needed that incorporated the processes of decay, death and renewal and so coined *Eniautos-Daimon*. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Socila Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p.xvii.

Apollo with his bow and lyre. Instead the *E-D* was more of an abstract, genderless spirit representing the fertility and prosperity of a community.

Harrison lays out her argument in a 1912 book entitled *Themis*, a text that was the result of a trip to Crete in 1904 with Francis Cornford. In Crete they met the archaeologist R.C. Bosanquet and viewed some of the items he had recently excavated from Palaikastro, a bronze age town on the east coast of the island. One such item was a second- or third-century A.D. stele (stone slab) that contained a transcription of a hymn to Zeus that was believed to be much older than the stele itself (Harrison estimated it to be from around 300 B.C.).<sup>634</sup> Harrison believed that since the slab was found far from Dikte, which was the site of a temple dedicated to Zeus and was located in central Crete, the hymn to the god it contained was ‘essentially a revival, and that we may expect to find in it fossilized ways of thinking’.<sup>635</sup> In other words, it is a transcript of earlier events or ideas of the Cretian people in general, a kind of survival, not necessarily an exact retelling of events that occurred at Dikte specifically. This slab, and the text of the hymn it contained, would fascinate Harrison for years and eventually become the cornerstone of her scholarship.

According to Gilbert Murray,<sup>636</sup> the translation of the hymn is as follows:

Io, Kouros most Great, I give hail, Kronian, Lord of all that is wet and gleaming, thou art come at the head of thy Daimones. To Dikte for the Year, Oh, march, and rejoice in the dance and song,  
That we make to thee with harps and pipes mingled together, and sing as we come to a stand at thy well-fenced altar.  
Io, etc.

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<sup>634</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. 4.

<sup>635</sup> Dikte was the name of a mountain on Crete where Zeus was believed to have been born. Ibid. p.6.

<sup>636</sup> Harrison does not translate this passage herself; instead she inserts Murray’s translation into her work.

For here the shielded Nurturers took thee, a child immortal, from  
Rhea, and with noise of beating feet hid thee away.

Io, etc.

And the Horai began to be fruitful year by year (?) and Dikè to  
possess mankind, and all wild living things were held about by wealth-  
loving Peace.

Io, etc.

To us also leap for full jars, and leap for fleecy flocks, and leap for  
fields of fruit, and for hives to bring increase.

Io, etc.

Leap for our Cities, and leap for our sea-borne ships, and leap for our  
young citizens and for goodly Themis.<sup>637</sup>

In the hymn, the character Zeus is never specifically identified, instead it is  
the name Kouros that the hymn invokes to provide good fortune. According to  
Harrison, Kouros is the vague *E-D* entity and the key things to stress about this  
figure are that it:

- 1) is attended by other daimons, or spirits;
- 2) dances and sings;
- 3) has a connection with Dikte at certain times of the year;
- 4) has an altar of some sort dedicated to it;
- 5) was taken from the character Rhea as a child amidst the noise of stamping  
feet;
- 6) has the ability to assure prosperity for crops, livestock, sea journeys and the  
youth.

According to Hesiod's *Theogony* when the infant Zeus is born on Crete, his  
mother Rhea gives him away to the Earth (Gaia) to protect him from his father.<sup>638</sup>  
Some versions of the narrative say that Gaia had Cretian warriors stand guard

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<sup>637</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>638</sup> *Hesiod*, trans. by Evelyn-White, pp. 113-114.

outside the cave Zeus was hidden in, and they batter their shields to drown out the baby's cries. With this in mind, coupled with the hymn's reference to Kouros being taken and hid in a similar fashion, as well as the connection established in the hymn between Kouros and Dikte, Harrison argued that this abstract Kouros figure would eventually become the character Zeus. However in the hymn, Kouros is not just another name for the father of the gods, Zeus, known from the time of Homer.<sup>639</sup> Here Kouros is an entity tied to a specific community that is being called upon to attend a significant event. His purpose, as revealed in the references to peace, crops and livestock, evidently was the preservation of the community's fertility and this was achieved through the medium of ritual dance. Furthermore, Harrison argued that the hymn sought Kouros's participation in the ritual. The desired fertility could only be assured if Kouros danced along with the other participants.<sup>640</sup>

Locating the context of the dance within the community was important to Harrison, and she argued that the hymn was a transcription of an early initiation ritual.<sup>641</sup> This ritual was one that Harrison believed existed among all primitive peoples; it was the moment when a boy became a man, changing from a member of a small family to a member of the larger tribal community. Similar to the way Frazer sought to explain how a single man became the king of a community, Harrison wanted to explain how a boy came to be seen as an adult member of a community. She believed that the hymn was a description of ritual because of the detailed actions involved: the singing and dancing the tribe was performing to gain the favor of the local spirit and usher the boys into manhood. She drew this conclusion with

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<sup>639</sup> Unlike Grinnir for Óðinn. Murray makes similar arguments concerning Kouros in Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), pp. 28-29.

<sup>640</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. 10.

<sup>641</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. 19.



reference to Frazer's examination of the indigenous peoples of Australia and the initiation rituals they practiced, which she saw as similar.<sup>642</sup>

Working from this hymn as her evidence, Harrison argued that behind all of the known anthropomorphic mythological figures from around the world, there existed a prior abstract local *E-D* figure that was a reflection of certain aspects of the local community and whose main function was to assure its fertility.<sup>643</sup> It would have been at this stage of societal development that Harrison's hymn was transcribed. Later, as the society came to the realization that the sun and rain were responsible for fertility, the *E-D* would have begun to have connections with the sky, and the position of the *E-D* would become more aloof, such as was evidenced by Homer's Zeus.

While this offers an explanation of the function of the Kouros figure in the hymn and how he may have eventually been transformed into Homer's Zeus, how does this help one to understand the origins of the ritual dancing and singing upon which the mythological hymn is supposedly based? Harrison argues that human beings in their most primitive communal states were easily excited. Upon returning from a hunt or battle, the participants from a community would easily fall into a spontaneous mimetic dance to retell the day's events to the other community members. This impulse was a reactionary one, and the exact movements of the dance would be determined by what had happened on the hunt or in the battle. Eventually, a 'standard' dance would emerge that was performed at the end of each hunt or battle. By this time, it did not necessarily have to contain references to the events that had just recently taken place. As the community developed, the dance changed from being a reactionary event to an anticipatory one: people would dance

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<sup>642</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p.18.

<sup>643</sup> Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 149. Also see the introduction in Harrison, *Themis*, pp. xiv-xv.

before the hunt or battle in order to assure success. This is what could be considered the beginning of ‘magic’ or the belief that human action could directly affect the outcome of events, as was seen earlier in the discussion of Lang. For example, a dance that mimicked rain might be believed to cause the rain to fall.

It was common for a community to begin to divide, and as it did so the different groups incorporated into expressions of their beliefs the animals that were associated with their diets. This marks the beginning of totemism. The communal dance would then adopt the characteristics of a particular animal and the dance became a means of assuring the fertility of that animal, and therefore the communal food source. Eventually a great dancer would emerge out of the group and become the center of attention. The other dancers were still important participants, but only in relation to the single standout figure. This was what Harrison believed she found in the representation of Kouros and his daimons. It was only a matter of time until this tangible figure, Kouros, became a unique, aloof projection and no longer a physical man. Also, since it is a human tendency to tell stories, Harrison argued that the penultimate stage of development of the myth was the addition of a life history for the central figure. Finally, the story overtakes the original reason for the ritual. This does not mean that the ritual ceases to occur, but the life history of the central character that was previously projected onto the ritual now becomes the reason for the ritual performance.<sup>644</sup>

Finding support for Harrison’s theories in Old Norse material, particularly in the Baldr narrative, is problematic. Harrison based her arguments on a specific set of features from the life of Zeus and the content of the Kouros hymn, and it is possible to reduce them down to two general ideas. First, as with Frazer, she believed that the

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<sup>644</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, pp. 42-47

intent behind myth and ritual is a community's desire to preserve fertility and that they demonstrate the way in which this should be done; the second idea is that a ritual involves dancing or singing in some way. As seen in the previous chapter, Frazer would have us believe that Baldr was the Norse vegetation-spirit, or fertility god, but there are other Norse sources that provide far more blatant examples of fertility deities. Furthermore, there is little suggestion of a dancing or singing ritual associated with Baldr. Harrison on her own does not provide a sufficient, comprehensive explanation of this narrative, especially not when it is examined in relation to other Norse narratives. But Harrison did not work alone, so judgment ought to be reserved until it is seen what her colleagues have to contribute.

### *Gilbert Murray*

If a Greek hymn was Harrison's obsession, the Greek theatre was Gilbert Murray's. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his early publications such as *Ancient Greek Literature* sought to explain the origins of drama from the wagon of Thespiis to the theatres of Rome.<sup>645</sup> In 1900, while on holiday in Switzerland, he met Jane Ellen Harrison and a lifelong friendship began.<sup>646</sup>

Murray was so involved in Harrison's development of the *E-D* theory that he contributed to her book *Themis* with an essay, *Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy*. This short piece sought to explain how Greek tragedy could have grown out of the rituals surrounding the *E-D*. In the next section, it will be shown that Francis Cornford contributed a similar argument to the academic debate for Greek comedy in a separate title, *Origin of Attic Comedy*. By application

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<sup>645</sup> Gilbert Murray, *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: William Heinemann, 1907). The first edition was published in 1897.

<sup>646</sup> Robinson, *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison*, p. 128.

of these two other men's theories, coupled with Harrison's general outline, a far more satisfying interpretation of the overall Baldr narrative can be obtained.

The long-lived Murray was born in Australia in 1866, and immigrated to England in 1877 with his mother. He studied for his university degree at St. John's College, Oxford and, after a brief professorship at the University of Glasgow, he returned to Oxford in 1905. Of the three 'Cambridge Ritualists' here examined, Murray is obviously the exception to that title because he was never affiliated with that institution other than through his scholastic friendships. However, these friendships will be shown to be quite influential, especially as regards the scholarship of Bertha Phillpotts. Murray died at the age of 91 in 1957.<sup>647</sup>

First, as it will serve as an indication of his later influence, a brief word must be said concerning Murray's early work on the development of theatre in Greece. Much of his work with Harrison on the *E-D* involved theoretical attempts to find an origin for theatre and drama; however, the early publications of Murray provided detailed expositions of the extant records regarding Greek theatre left by ancient writers. In *Ancient Greek Literature*, Murray stated that the entertainer Thespis had a chorus of dancing singers who imitated the ring dances of Dionysus' satyr-choir. In order to give the dancers a break and add variety to the proceedings, at times Thespis 'came forward personally at intervals and recited to the public a speech in trochaic tetrameters'.<sup>648</sup> This method of performance was copied by others, with the speaker often representing a hero, legendary king or god. As time passed, the speaker took on multiple roles through the use of costume changes, and supporting characters emerged from the choir. Murray tells us that for Thespis, there were often two additional speakers. In terms of the division between tragedy and comedy,

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<sup>647</sup> See Duncan Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM 1866-1957* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) for an extensive biography.

<sup>648</sup> Murray, *Ancient Greek Literature*, p. 205.

Murray initially followed Aristotle very closely, restating that tragedy came from the *Dithyramb* and comedy from phallic performances.<sup>649</sup> However, the influence of Harrison's scholarship, particularly the developing idea of the *E-D*, had a significant impact on Murray's thinking.

In his *Excursus* contribution to Harrison's book, Murray refined his ideas concerning the origins of drama, cautioning the reader to accept two things as given. First, tragedy was originally a ritual dance that represented a ritual practice, something he now calls a *Sacer Ludus*. Secondly, for Greek tragedy specifically, the dance was centered on the figure of Dionysus. Since Dionysus is the Greek example of the *E-D*, any culture's equivalent figure would be the focal point of its drama. Accepting this, Murray argued that comedy and tragedy were merely narratives about the different stages in the life of the *E-D*. Comedy leads to and describes his marriage or feasting; tragedy leads to and describes his death.<sup>650</sup>

The path of comedy Murray left to the work of Francis Cornford, taking on the responsibility of explaining tragedy for himself. Murray argued that an examination of any ancient tragedy would reveal that it contains in some form the following constituent elements: 1) a contest of some sort between opposing forces; 2) a ritual or sacrificial death, often involving dismemberment; 3) a messenger who tells the audience about the death, as the death itself was rarely performed; 4) a lamentation about the death, but also potentially joy and the coming of new life; 5) discovery of the actual dead body; and 6) the resurrection of the dead figure and a celebration of its glory.<sup>651</sup>

Murray believed that Euripides's play, *The Bacchae*, was the perfect demonstration of these six elements. The play is about the god Dionysus returning

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<sup>649</sup> Murray, *Ancient Greek Literature*, pp. 203-210.

<sup>650</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. 341.

<sup>651</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, pp. 342-343.

to his maternal homeland, Thebes, where worship of him has been outlawed by his cousin, now king, Pentheus. Irritated by his cousin's edict and deprived of his followers, Dionysus casts a spell of enchantment over the women of the area causing them to spontaneously start dancing and hunting in a manner fitting Dionysian rituals. Dionysus himself is captured and questioned by Pentheus, but Dionysus is elusive and escapes, destroying Pentheus's palace in the process. Much of the first part of the play is illustrative of Murray's first element, as it is a series of contests between Dionysus and Pentheus, with Pentheus eventually being tricked by Dionysus into dressing as a woman. The third element actually comes next, with a messenger appearing to tell the audience that Pentheus has climbed a tall tree to see what the women were doing. Dionysus then directs the women to pull him down, which they do. They then tear Pentheus limb from limb, the second element. The fourth and fifth elements become evident when the mother of Pentheus, Agave, pulls her son's head from his body while under the effects of Dionysus. She then realizes what she has done when her father, Cadmus, gathers up the body parts of Pentheus. There is no resurrection of Pentheus, but by relying on the scholarship of Cornford, Murray argues that Pentheus and Dionysus were originally the same character, so the sixth element of resurrection and celebration is manifest with a renewed belief in Dionysus's godhead by the people of Thebes.<sup>652</sup>

How does any of this advance an understanding of Old Norse myths? If we allow ourselves to use Snorri's version of the Baldr myth, many of Murray's six elements of tragedy can be seen in some form. The first element of a contest is represented by the gods' sport of throwing things at Baldr, none of which are able to hurt him. The ritual death element appears when the mistletoe is used against Baldr

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<sup>652</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. 345. See also Euripides, *The Bacchæ*, trans. by Gilbert Murray in 'The Harvard Classics' (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14), VIII, part 8.

in the contest. The messenger, the third element, could be Hermóðr, as he travels to Hel in an attempt to recover Baldr. There is a slight variation here, as Snorri has him bringing a message to Hel, not delivering a message directly to the reader/audience. Another difference is that Hermóðr is not retelling the news of death. The fourth element of lamentation is quite clear when Hel demands that everything must weep for Baldr before she will allow him to return; there is, however, no sign of expectant joy. The fifth element of discovering the body is not evident in Snorri's narrative, unless Hermóðr's arrival in Hel, and finding Baldr there, could classify as such. The final element of resurrection is present without a doubt, as Baldr returns to life after the Ragnarøk.

Though it is not a work of Old Norse, the Finnish legend of Lemminkäinen provides strong links to the Baldr narrative and Murray's elements. Lemminkäinen was known for his pursuit of women and prowess as a lover. In one such pursuit, a maiden sets him a series of tasks before she will consent to his company. The final task is to collect a swan from an underground river. When Lemminkäinen reaches the river, he is shot and killed by a blind herdsman with a piece of cowbane, a poisonous plant. The blind man then chops up Lemminkäinen's body and throws the pieces into the river. Finally, after much searching and the aid of a magic rake, Lemminkäinen's mother is able to collect all the pieces of Lemminkäinen's body and resurrect him.<sup>653</sup> Some scholars, such as F.R. Schröder, believe that the similarity of the narratives of Baldr and Lemminkäinen demonstrate Baldr's position as a fertility deity, since that is how Lemminkäinen is interpreted.<sup>654</sup> The similarity of having the protagonist killed by a blind individual using a plant projectile is also striking.

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<sup>653</sup> Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, trans. by Keith Bosley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 165-183.

<sup>654</sup> See F.R. Schröder, *Balder und der zweite Merseburger Spruch (Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift, XXIV, 1953)* for the original argument or Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 117-118 for a summary.

However, the *Kalevala* in which the story of Lemminkäinen is recorded was only compiled in the early nineteenth century; therefore there was plenty of time for the Baldr narrative and fertility imagery to enter into the Finnish folklore tradition. Thus, while it helps reinforce an argument based on Murray's theories, it certainly does not prove them as they relate to the Old Norse Baldr.

For the most part, Murray's six elements of tragedy appear to work quite well with Snorri's Baldr narrative. That being said, Murray himself claimed that tragedy and comedy were both parts of the *E-D*'s life. As he deferred on issues relating to the origin of comedy to Cornford, the final task remains of establishing how well Baldr's life fits into Cornford's theories on comedy.

### *Francis Cornford*

Born the son of an English clergyman in February of 1874, Francis Cornford was the youngest of the ritual scholars considered in this work. In 1909 he married Frances Darwin, the granddaughter of Charles Darwin. He died in 1943.<sup>655</sup> However, the key point for the purposes of this study was that in 1898, during his fourth year at Trinity College, Cambridge, Cornford sat in on a lecture of Harrison's and sent her a letter afterward arguing a point of contention. From this exchange, a scholarly friendship began.

As previewed in the preceding sections, Cornford's contribution to the ritualists' scholarship came with his explanation for the origins of Greek comedy. It is without doubt that Cornford's work grew out of that of Murray's. In the preface of his *Attic Comedy*, the work upon which most of this examination shall rely, Cornford clearly states that 'the ritual drama lying behind Comedy proves to be

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<sup>655</sup> For a more detail bibliography, see *Selected Papers of F.M. Cornford*, ed. by Alan C. Bowen (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987).



essentially of the same type as that in which Gilbert Murray has sought the origin of Tragedy.<sup>656</sup> This should not be taken to mean that Cornford was in complete accord with his Oxford colleague, however. While Murray held that tragedy dealt with the death of the Daimon and comedy with marriage or feasting, Cornford formulated a different, but not necessarily contradictory theory. Following Aristotle in many ways, Cornford felt that tragedy was a form of drama that had at its heart a reliance on plot, whereas comedy often disregarded formal plot and placed far more importance on character development. He therefore examined the comic characters in the plays of Aristophanes to see if there was a common thread among the characters. He found that there were three traits or events that would surround certain individuals in the plays. Any character possessing these three traits Cornford lumped together under the Aristotelian title of *alazon* or 'Imposter', and this was one of three types of characters, the second being an 'Ironical' hero figure and the third being a 'Buffoon' subordinate of the hero, that was necessary for a comedy.

As for the characteristics of the Imposter, Cornford argues that:

These impertinents arrive when the victory of the *Agon* is already won. The scene of sacrifice, cooking, or feasting has no sooner begun than an oracle-monger, a poet, an informer, presents himself to interrupt the proceedings or to claim a part in the good things. Often there is a whole string of them ... Their common fate is a well-deserved rebuff. When they have made an exhibition of themselves, they are driven off with abuse, frequently seconded by blows.<sup>657</sup>

The three main elements of the comedic Imposter are:

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<sup>656</sup> Francis Cornford, *Attic Comedy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914), p. vii.

<sup>657</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 132.

- 1) Interrupting a significant sacrifice or wedding-feast in order to ‘claim a share in the fruits of the victory’;
- 2) Having a general demeanor that is a ‘vaunting, boastful, swaggering’ one;
- 3) Often being ‘regularly mocked, beaten, or otherwise mishandled, and driven away.’<sup>658</sup>

Though he does not label it as one of his main characteristics, Cornford also argued for an additional feature of the Imposter: he was to be thought of as the exact ‘anti-thesis’ of the play’s hero.<sup>659</sup>

As for the hero, Aristotle had identified two characters who act in opposition to the Imposter: *bomolochos*, ‘Buffoon’; and *ieron*, ‘Ironical type’. Cornford felt that there were only small differences between the two and they essentially could be understood as one, which he then called the Ironical man.<sup>660</sup> The exact characteristics of this type of individual, Cornford identified as the following:

Especially it meant the man who masks his batteries of deceit behind a show of ordinary good nature; or indulges a secret pride and conceit of wisdom while he affects ignorance and self-depreciation, but lets you see all the while that he could enlighten you if he chose, and so makes a mock of you.<sup>661</sup>

While the secretive and shadowy nature of both the Ironical man and the Imposter makes it somewhat hard to tell the difference between them, ‘the Impostor claims to possess higher qualities than he has, the Ironical man is given to making himself out

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<sup>658</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 148.

<sup>659</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 138.

<sup>660</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>661</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 137.

worse than he is.’<sup>662</sup> To further complicate matters, Cornford also suggests that at times the Ironical man (standing in opposition to the Imposter) could have a Buffoon subordinate.

He is a mere delegate on whom this side of the hero’s role is devolved in situations where the hero himself has to keep up a less farcical character. Hence his services are generally needed only till the *Agon* is over, and the hero, released from the arduous part of his action, can play the fool to his own and every one’s content.

This means that during the *Agon*, which one knows from Murray is the contest or battle of the play, the Ironical man has his subordinate do the dirty fighting for him. Once the contest is over, the Ironical man resumes his protagonist role.

The question remains how these two characters, the Ironical man and the Imposter, are to be understood as antithesis images of one another, but originating from the same source. To understand this point, it is first necessary to examine the heart of Cornford’s theory as to how comedic drama relates back to the *E-D*. Cornford argued that the origin of the Imposter and Ironical man can be found within Dionysian rituals. He believed that these rituals were at a very early stage cannibalistic, involving the eating of a human or totemic representation of the dismembered (Murray’s 2<sup>nd</sup> element) god or spirit. However, as society progressed, people started to question why the god had to die and Cornford reasoned that the personality of the spirit must have been split into two separate characters, the beneficent and the evil. The evil antagonistic character then becomes the killer of the beneficent one, but this antagonist eventually is killed himself by the worshipers

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<sup>662</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 137.

of the other.<sup>663</sup> As if defending Murray's explanation of why there was no resurrection motif in the *Bacchae*, Cornford stated that 'the enemy is the God himself, his fate is the same'.<sup>664</sup> Therefore, Pentheus was just another form of Dionysus.

In searching for an Imposter figure in the general narrative of Baldr the character of Loki immediately presents itself, in particular his performance in the poem *Lokasenna* from the first chapter. As Snorri retells the narrative leading to Baldr's death and Ragnarok, the events of *Lokasenna* are completely absent.<sup>665</sup> However, the actions of Loki in this *Poetic Edda* poem are almost perfect examples of Cornford's 'Imposter' argument. First, Loki interrupts the feast at Ægir's hall, then in his boastful and mocking tones, he berates the host and guests while demanding a portion of the provisions being served. Finally, after receiving his equal share of mocking and scorn, he is driven from the hall by Þórr and then bound up, using the insides of his disemboweled son. According to Snorri, Loki broke free at Ragnarok and was killed by Heimdalr just prior to the world being reborn and Baldr's return. As such, he fits Cornford's three criteria of the Imposter almost perfectly.

The Ironical man is a more complex issue. In a perfect example, this character would somehow be Baldr. However, there is no source evidence that displays Baldr as a mocking intellectual hero. Instead, it is the figure of Óðinn that immediately suggests itself for this role. Several examples can quickly be produced, such as *Grimnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Vafþrúðnismál* where Óðinn adopts a disguise and plays the wiser of the individuals present. His frequent use of

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<sup>663</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>664</sup> Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 149.

<sup>665</sup> Snorri was certainly aware of the poem and briefly references it late in *Skaldsparmál* during a discussion of the proper use of the giant Ægir's name. *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 95.

alternative names also testifies to his guarded nature. A major difficulty for interpreting Óðinn as the *E-D* is simply that there is little evidence to suggest he was seen as a fertility god, unless one interprets a god of death to be linked to fertility as its antithesis. Furthermore, there are no narratives concerning Óðinn that clearly contain Murray's elements of tragedy. For a Ritualist interpretation, therefore Baldr seems to be the better choice.

If one follows Cornford's way of thinking, and also accepts that Loki is ultimately responsible for Baldr's death, it would then have to be argued that Baldr and Loki were originally the same entity. This character is Harrison's *E-D* who was worshipped in order to provide fertility. As the people of Crete called their spirit Kouros, the Norse named theirs Baldr. These Norse, Cornford would argue, were originally cannibalistic in their worship, themselves being responsible for the death of their spirit Baldr. As their society developed, cannibalism disappeared, but the spirit still needed to die and the Imposter character of Loki emerged.

#### *A Norse Eniautos-Daimon*

The constant problem with supposing Baldr to be a representation of the Ritualists' *E-D* is the lack of any solid fertility links. Since this is the primary function of the *E-D* as laid out by the Ritualists, it is a considerable problem. One possible solution is the suggestion made by Neckel that Baldr and the fertility god Freyr were connected at an earlier time.<sup>666</sup> The evidence for this is found primarily in Snorri's physical description of Baldr:

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<sup>666</sup> Gustav Neckel, *Die Überlieferungen vom Gotte Baldr* (Dortmund: F.W. Ruhfus, 1920), pp. 132-220.

Hann er svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum, ok eitt gras er svá hvítt at jafnat er til Baldrs brár.

He is so fair in appearance and bright that light shines from him, and there is a plant so white that it is called after Baldr's eyelash.<sup>667</sup>

The key is the use of the term *bjartr* for bright. As seen in the first chapter, adjectives describing light and bright features of Freyr and Skírnir were prevalent in Old Norse literature, both of whom were seen as linked to fertility. If one accepts that there is a connection between Baldr and Freyr, there should also be evidence of the *E-D* in narratives concerning Freyr, primarily in *Skírnismál* but also in *Lokasenna*.

In the first chapter of this study it was shown that there are considerable links between Freyr and fertility, as well as between his assistant, Skírnir, and terms for light.<sup>668</sup> Commentators have different opinions about how these two characters are connected. Magnus Olsen believes they are the same individual, whereas Dronke argues that Skírnir is just a manifestation of a specific ability of Freyr (that of producing sunshine). We know that the name Skírnir has similarities to the way Old Norse and other early European cultures described the shining of the sun and by examining the use of the word 'skína' many connections to Freyr can be seen. In *Grímnismál*, he is called 'skírom Frey' or 'shining Freyr', and in *Gylfaginning* Freyr is described as the ruler of 'skini sólar' or 'sunshine'. Cornford would surely argue that Skírnir is merely the Buffoon subordinate of the Ironical man, Freyr in this instance, and the subordinate character disappears after the *Agon* (contest) is over. Fittingly, nothing more is said of Skírnir after he has completed his task with Gerðr, thereby bolstering Freyr's applicability to Cornford's arguments.

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<sup>667</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 23; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 23.

<sup>668</sup> See page 50.

To argue for Freyr as a representation of the *E-D* with *Skírnismál* providing the evidence of it, all three of the Ritualist scholars' approaches will be needed. To begin, Harrison's methodology can be used to suggest an origin for *Skírnismál*. The narrative fits into one of the later stages of her evolutionary progression of mankind's interaction with the *E-D*. Prior to its becoming a narrative story, the character Freyr would have been the lead dancer in a communal dance that was meant to ensure the fertility of the community performing it, similar to the function of the Kronos figure. The argument that the *Skírnismál* narrative centers on fertility is well established and can be seen in a variety of forms.

A simple illustration of this is found in the etymologies of the names of the two principle characters: one means sunshine (*Skírnir*) and the other means earth (*Gerðr*), the two basic ingredients of fertility. More examples can be found. The name Freyr appears to have etymological connections to the Anglo Saxon term *hlāford* which meant 'the ward of the bread', suggesting a role in providing sustenance; however this etymological connection was previously shown to be a stretch. Snorri tells us in *Gylfaginning*, *Hákonar saga Góða* and *Skáldskaparmál* that Freyr was responsible for the produce of the earth and was seen as a harvest god; the narratives *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Qgmundar Pátrr Dyttis* support this view. Archaeological finds of the guldgubbar foils represent Freyr's wedding and they were buried in the earth to assure fertility. Finally, his two attendants in *Lokasenna*, Byggvir and Beyla, have names that are related to Old Norse terms for corn (*bygg*) and a cow (*baula*), both objects of fertility.<sup>669</sup>

As for Gerðr, her name and family also have various earth connections, her name can mean either field or garden, depending on the translator, and her mother's

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<sup>669</sup> See page 57.

name, Aurboða, has etymological connections to earth, mud and wet clay. From her father, Gymir, there exist strong associations with water or the sea. Finally, in earlier parts of the *Poetic Edda* the Nordic poets made a deliberate connection between the sun and ground for their fertility. In the fourth strophe of the *Völuspá*, the völva says:

Áðr Burs synir biððom um ypþo,  
þeir er miðgarð, mæran, scópo;  
sól scein sunnan á salar steina,  
þá var grund groin grænom lauki.

First the sons of Bur brought up the earth,  
the glorious ones who shaped the world between;  
the sun shone from the south on the hall of stones,  
then the soil was grown over with green plants.<sup>670</sup>

So the concept of combining sunshine and earth to get fertility was certainly known in Nordic lands. With all this evidence, it would not be difficult for Harrison to argue that the Freyr character was an early Norse example of a fertility deity. What has not been seen yet, however, is any evidence he had a role as the dance leader.

Before determining what ritual role he had in a dance, the argument must proceed to identify a location where the ritual dances took place. Initially, given archaeological and literary evidence, the setting described at Gamla Uppsala might serve. This is for two reasons: first, it is one of the very few archaeologically verified sites of early Nordic cult activity; and second, Adam of Bremen has left a detailed description of bloody ritual sacrifices and co-coordinated dancing being performed there around the time of the Spring Equinox, a fact that would appeal to

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<sup>670</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 1; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 4.



Harrison given the fact that she saw Greek rituals as tied to the spring festivals.<sup>671</sup> As seen above, Adam also noted that when an important marriage approached, the people made their sacrifices specifically to Fricco (Freyr).<sup>672</sup> Finally, there are curious numerical elements surrounding Freyr and Uppsala that appear to be ritual survivals of some sort. The strongest of these is the importance placed on the number nine, especially in relation to gatherings and sacrifices. The festival at Uppsala would last nine days, with nine sacrifices on each of the nine days. Nine days was also the betrothal period between when Gerðr agreed to marry Freyr and when the actual wedding was scheduled to occur. Moving beyond examples that apply only to Freyr, the number of references to nine dramatically expands.<sup>673</sup> What this numerical connection means is a matter for debate. The important thing for the purposes of this study is that a connection between the primary deity (Freyr) and a location known for ritual practices exists. That being said, it should be noted that there is no evidence of a link between the text of the *Skírnismál* poem and Gamla Uppsala.

Next, one needs to address the question of the Norse life events the *E-D* would experience. There is strong literary evidence for weddings and accompanying feasts in the Old Norse mythological system as seen in the poems *Skírnismál* and *Lokasenna*.<sup>674</sup> In the first poem, the character Freyr is in pursuit of a bride, and the

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<sup>671</sup> Harrison, *Themis*, p. xvi.

<sup>672</sup> *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. by Tschan, pp. 207-208.

<sup>673</sup> Other examples referring to specific characters are: Óðinn hung himself for nine nights on the Yggdrasil, receiving nine magic spells when it was over. His ring Draupnir creates eight copies of itself (so nine total) every nine nights and when he is captured by King Geirrðr, he doesn't reveal himself or any information until the ninth day of his captivity (when Geirrðr is killed). After the death of Baldr, Hermóðr rode for nine nights to get to Hel. Þórr took nine steps backward before dying when he was poisoned by the Jörmungandr. Heimdallr had nine mothers and Ægir had nine daughters, while Niðr and Skaði spent alternating sets of nine days between the mountains and seaside.

<sup>674</sup> If one is willing to disregard the appearance and events of *Hárbarðljóð*, then the way *Skírnismál*, *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna* appear in the *Poetic Edda* all might fit together as 1) obtaining the bride 2) obtaining materials for the wedding 3) having the wedding feast.

second tells of possible events at what Cornford might describe as a wedding feast, despite there being no specific mention of a wedding in *Lokasenna*. Neither can be a tragedy because death does not figure into the narratives, and while the progression of the Baldr narrative outlined above fits well into Murray's elements of tragedy, there are fewer applicable elements in the life of Freyr.<sup>675</sup> In *Skírnismál*, it would be natural to place Skírnir in the messenger role (element 3) because of his movements between Freyr and Gerðr. The great contest (element 1) being waged is to overcome Gerðr's resistance to becoming Freyr's bride. These two features are the only clear connections to Murray's elements that can be specifically identified in *Skírnismál*. Freyr's ritual death (element 2) comes in his battle with Surtr and his flaming sword, however this is not contained in *Skírnismál*, but rather in Snorri's summary of it. As Freyr has given away his own magical sword, he is unable to defeat his opponent and is killed. Lamentation and resurrection elements do not exist at all, in regard to Freyr, as they did for Baldr, nor is there any dismemberment and discovery of his dead body.

The absence of some of Murray's elements is not a fatal blow to a Ritualist interpretation of Freyr or more specifically of *Skírnismál*. The elements that are lacking merely reinforce the interpretation that this particular poem was not a tragedy. To argue instead that the narrative of Freyr's life is a comedy, involving the specific types of characters Cornford required a comedy to have, the life of the 'Freyr E-D' needs to include the events of *Lokasenna* in addition to those of *Skírnismál*, as *Lokasenna* probably contains the best example of an Old Norse Imposter figure who meets the terms of Cornford's arguments. But despite the fact

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<sup>675</sup> It is possible that *Lokasenna* is meant to be understood as Baldr's wake.

that Freyr is present and trades insults with Loki (clearly the Imposter figure) in *Lokasenna*, there is little to suggest any qualities of the Ironical man in Freyr.

In conclusion, it is difficult to argue for Freyr as a stand-alone representation of the *E-D* as explained by the Ritualists. The lack of the appropriate elements of tragedy is very problematic. The argument by Cornford, that his Imposter and Ironical man were at some point the same entity, does provide some possibilities. It would mean that, by extension, one could argue that Baldr and Freyr were once the same individual, with Baldr's experiences (death and resurrection) being the basis of tragedy and Freyr's experiences (marriage) being the source of comedy. Loki's character grows out of this pairing as the evil Imposter who is also the party responsible for killing Baldr. Completing this argument, the cunning Óðinn would be the fourth piece of the puzzle, serving as a representation of the Ironical man figure. All of which exposes a critical flaw in the application of the *E-D* to any society. Multiple characters and multiple poems in combination are necessary to show evidence of the Ritualists' theories. While Murray and Cornford seem to have acknowledged this by their use of different poems and characters to make their arguments, they never provide a sufficient explanation for how the characters are interrelated and thereby traceable to a common source.

This dilemma is the heart of the Ritualists' problems. Their theories, though intricate and not without some comparative examples, do not have the capacity to be proven. Only an anthropological study of a culture from its earliest days, detailing the slow evolutionary process of developing drama would suffice, and this was not something they had available to them. This is not to say that their ideas were without influence. They did have influence, and the second half of this chapter will deal with a scholar who followed in their footsteps, coming to slightly different

conclusions perhaps because she took a more conservative approach in what she set out to prove.

## **Bertha S. Phillpotts**

### *Life and Goals*

Bertha Phillpotts was born in Bedford, England, in 1877 and attended Girton College, Cambridge from 1898 – 1902.<sup>676</sup> She would later go on to be the college librarian from 1906 – 1909, and then the Mistress from 1922 – 1925, before stepping down in 1926 to become a lecturer and director of the Scandinavian Studies program. In 1929 she was awarded a DBE for her services to education. She married Hugh Newall in 1931. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last long as Phillpotts died a year later at the age of 55. For our purposes, the most important part of Phillpotts's life was the period from 1913 to 1922 when she was the Lady Carlisle Research Fellow at Somerville College, Oxford. It was during this time period that she would craft the theories that make her a necessary inclusion in this study.

In 1920, Phillpotts published a book titled *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* that has come to be considered the 'most radical form' of the

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<sup>676</sup> Girton was an all-women institution at this time. Neither Girton nor Jane Ellen Harrison's Newnham College were considered official Colleges of Cambridge University until 1948 when women were admitted as full members of the University. Girton became a mixed college in 1977, a hundred years after Phillpotts's birth.

myth-ritual hypothesis as relates to Nordic material.<sup>677</sup> She states on the very first page of her preface:

My aim is simply to place before scholars a theory of the dramatic origin of the older Eddic poems. I shall be satisfied if I have made clear the grounds which have forced me to formulate the theory: should there be any truth in it, others, better fitted than I, will work it out in all its many bearings on history, religion and literature.<sup>678</sup>

Unlike the Ritualists, who developed overarching theories they believed applied to all myths, Phillpotts's main goal was to explain what she saw as one previous stage in the development of the myths that were recorded in the *Poetic Edda*. She was not deliberately trying to argue for the original source of the myth, as the Ritualists had attempted, just a stage prior to the time when the narratives were being recorded in text. This previous stage, she said, was when they were enacted dramas and her entire work was devoted to identifying the small clues left in the text of the *Poetic Edda* poems that hinted at a prior dramatic stage. However, through the examination of her work, it will be shown that though she rejected the Ritualists' idea of an *E-D*, she did see early Old Norse society as rooted in totemism.

Though her goals were different, the Ritualists clearly influenced her thinking. In her preface to *The Elder Edda*, Phillpotts acknowledged in particular the influence of Gilbert Murray, who was the Vice-President of Somerville during her time there. In her writing, there is also evidence of the influence of his and other Ritualist ideas. The preface is interesting because it can be read like a list of things to explore further when time permits, therefore her method of argumentation in *The*

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<sup>677</sup> John Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 48.

<sup>678</sup> Bertha Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. vii.

*Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* can be difficult to follow. In places she relies completely on the work of Frazer and, like him, she seems to often get lost in her arguments and therefore loses focus. Still, Phillpotts will provide a fitting end to a section attempting to show how one of the Ritualists scholars could adapt their general principles to fit a specific ancient culture other than the Greeks, providing a defensible argument as to what Old Norse drama might have looked like.

In terms of sources, Phillpotts used the entire *Poetic Edda* to argue her positions. For the most part, this section will limit itself to her work with the mythological poems; however some points, such as her first major argument, will require reference to the heroic poems found in the later sections of the *Poetic Edda*.

### *Themes*

First, Phillpotts argued that there are themes within the written *Poetic Edda* poems that suggest a previous stage of dramatic presentation. These include things like improvisation tools hidden in the word play, and characters whose only true purpose is to set or change a scene. Some of these themes she approached from a comparative mindset, believing that if she could demonstrate where the *Poetic Edda* poems contain themes she identifies as common to early drama from other cultures, it would necessarily prove that the *Poetic Edda* poems containing these themes were also once enacted. Other themes, such as the use of prose, are a matter of where these poems were presented, either in Norway or Iceland, but still they can be seen as indicators of drama. Lastly, even though this will be the first theme investigated, the way the poets describe the events of a poem can be considered indicators of dramatic origins.

### **Describing Events**

The first theme Phillpotts pointed out is the different ways of treating action found in the mythological poems compared with the heroic ones. She noted that the characters in the heroic poems are beset by questions of moral conflicts and these precipitate human actions. Conversely, the mythological poems contain no such dilemmas and ask only that the reader follows along with the task set before the god and upon which the story revolves.<sup>679</sup> In *Skírnismál*, Skírnir never questions or shows remorse for the way he treats and threatens Gerðr, whereas in the heroic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Sigrún is very conflicted about her love and the actions she takes in relation to the hero, Helgi.<sup>680</sup> Given this reliance on plot, Phillpotts's approach shows a marked similarity to that established by Aristotle. The discrepancy between the mythological and heroic poems she attributed to a difference in audience, arguing that the heroic poems were created by and for a more learned, aristocratic society, while the mythological poems would have been the products of an earlier, 'less enlightened society, which had not yet begun to question the primitive traditional conceptions bequeathed to it by the past.'<sup>681</sup> The mythological poems are therefore better indicators of early Norse culture than the heroic poems.

In examining Skaldic poetry as a third genre, Phillpotts found another curious discrepancy, and potentially the most important one for this study. The Eddic poets,

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<sup>679</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 24.

<sup>680</sup> This heroic poem is part of the love story between the valkyrie Sigrún and Helgi Hundingsbane. When Helgi is killed, he is buried in a mound. At one point, Helgi returns to his burial mound where he and Sigrún spend the night together. In the morning, he has to leave. According to the poem, Sigrún spent the rest of her life waiting for Helgi to return again. We should be careful however that the gender equality of 21<sup>st</sup> century society is not read back onto 13<sup>th</sup> century literature and grant that the difference between Skírnir and Sigrún could be examples of expected gender roles in that early period.

<sup>681</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 25.

both heroic and mythological, had a tendency to avoid the description of action, especially conflict:

A dragon-fight is represented in dialogue, with no word of the dragon's awful appearance, of the fury of the fight, of the flowing of blood, of the mighty strokes dealt by the slayer. The few attempts at describing stirring scenes are obviously skaldic devices: 'There was a din in the court-yard, crowded with horses, the *weapon-song* of champions.'<sup>682</sup>

Phillpotts believed that this suggests the action, left out of the prose, was enacted before the listening audience. There was no reason to tell the audience what they were seeing.

### **Incremental Repetition**

The second major theme Phillpotts put forward was the tendency for the *Poetic Edda* poems to include incremental repetition. She argued that the repeated phrases common to some Old Norse poems are indications of an earlier period when the poems were recited and the poets had some improvisational leeway in how they spoke. Phillpotts stated:

The chain of questions and answers which is so characteristic of them suggests an origin in popular entertainments. The ready-witted answer or retort is obviously most interesting to the audience when it is unexpected, that is to say improvised ... This is the frequency of repetition, and the linking of the strophes; devices which leave the improvising poet a moment to elaborate his question or his answer.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 34.

<sup>683</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 93.



As an example, she cited how in *Alvíssmál* many of the strophes begin with Þórr saying:

Segðu mér þat, Alvíss –öll of rök fíra  
vǫromk, dvergr, at vitir –;

Tell me this, All-wise–I foresee, dwarf,  
that you know all the fates of men–<sup>684</sup>

Following each use of this phrase, Þórr then goes on to ask something specific. In *Vafþrúðnismál*, likewise, the giant and Óðinn frequently use repetitive phrases at the beginning of their questions. For instance, before he asks each of his questions, Vafþrúðnir uses the phrase:

Segðu þat, Gagnráðr, allz þú á gólfi vill  
þíns um freista frama:

Tell me, Gagnrad, since on the hall-floor  
you want to try your luck:

The pattern is then repeated when Óðinn is the inquisitor:

Segðu þat it eina, ef þitt æði dugir  
ok þú, Vafþrúðnir, vitir:

Tell me this one thing if your knowledge is sufficient  
and you, Vafthrudnir, know:<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>684</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.121; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 111.

<sup>685</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.46-47; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 42-43.

The only alteration is the way Óðinn begins to incrementally increase the number with each new question.

In the focus poem, *Skírnismál*, Phillpotts acknowledged that this repetition is less pronounced, but traces of it can still be seen when Skírnir and Freyr discuss the use of Freyr's sword and horse:

Mar gefðu mér þá, þann er mik um myrkvan beri,  
vísan vafrloga,  
ok þat sverð, er siálft vegiz  
við iotna ætt!

Mar ek þér þann gef, er þik um myrkvan berr,  
vísan vafrloga,  
ok þat sverð, er siálft mun vegaz,  
ef sá er horskr, er hefir.

Skírnir said:

Give me that horse which will carry me through the dark, sure  
flickering flame,  
And that sword which will fight by itself against the giant race.

Freyr said:

I'll give you that horse which will carry you through the dark,  
sure, flickering flame,  
And that sword which will fight by itself if he who wields it is  
wise.<sup>686</sup>

In the first strophe, Skírnir asks for Freyr's horse and sword. In the second strophe, Freyr answers using the same wording that Skírnir employed previously with only a minor difference in the ending.

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<sup>686</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.68; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 62.

Phillpotts concluded that because this repetition is only used in poems that have more than one speaker and never in strophe sequences uttered by the same character, that it tells us that what traditionally would occur is:

one bard or reciter asks a question or makes a statement, and the other repeats the formula, taking what lies ready to his hand while he composes his own verses, and thus making equal use of his quick memory and of his gift of ready improvisation.<sup>687</sup>

Therefore, as with Aristotle's theory, Phillpotts believed the beginnings are with improvisation. The words of the poem are crafted so that one individual, hearing what his counterpart had just said, would be able to answer easily.

### **Supernumerary and Theriomorphic Characters**

The next theme that Phillpotts identified was the frequent use of what she classified as supernumerary characters. In ancient drama, these characters' 'whole *raison d'être* is to show the movements of the main characters and the change of scene'.<sup>688</sup> Her first example is Frigg's role in *Vafþrúðnismál*, which Phillpotts thought only exists 'to let us see Odin's start for the giant's hall'.<sup>689</sup> In *Lokasenna*, Eldir is also a character who, by conversing with Loki, sets the scene and explains what is currently happening. In the same poem, Beyla fills a similar role as she heralds the coming of Þórr with her strophe:

Fiðll ǫll sciálfa, hygg ek á fǫr vera

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<sup>687</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 98. Phillpotts feels that repeated phrases found in monologue poems such as *Hávamál* are merely memory technique for the poet to keep their place.

<sup>688</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 109.

<sup>689</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 109.

heiman Hlórriða;  
hann ræð ró, þeim er rægir hér  
goð öll ok guma.

All the mountains shake; I think Thor must be on his way home;  
he'll bring peace to those who quarrel here, all the gods and men.<sup>690</sup>

After an admonishment by Loki, the prose then informs us that Þórr has arrived and he begins to chastise Loki.

The craftiest examples of this practice, according to Phillpotts, come from *Skírnismál* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*. In the former, the poet first uses a mute character, Freyr's horse, as the supernumerary that by its presence, not its words, will advance the action. Skírnir says to the animal in the tenth strophe:

Myret er úti, mál kveð ek okkr fara  
úrig fiöll yfir,  
þursa þjóð yfir;  
báðir við komomk, eða ollr báða tekr  
sá inn ámatki iqtunn.

It is dark outside, I declare it's time for us to go  
over the dewy mountain,  
to rush over nations;  
we will both come back or the hideous giant  
will take us both.<sup>691</sup>

This strophe serves as a way for Skírnir to set up the scene transition between the residence of Freyr and that of Gerðr. After this exchange between man and horse, a second supernumerary is introduced in the form of the shepherd. Since the content

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<sup>690</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.104; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 94.

<sup>691</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 68-69; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 63.

of his actual spoken dialogue is largely superfluous, consisting only of warnings that Skírnir cannot succeed, his real purpose is to be a marker of Skírnir's progress on his journey between the two residences. Reaching the herdsman and asking how to gain entry into Gerðr's residence lets the audience know that Skírnir is now at a different location. Phillpotts's final character of this type in *Skírnismál* was Gerðr's maid, whose only purpose is to draw attention to the fact that Skírnir has dismounted from his horse and is now outside. Her argument was that these two characters are how the poet chose to depict the action of Skírnir surmounting the fiery wall that is said to surround Gerðr's house.

The last example Phillpotts gave of a supernumerary character was also a maid, this time Sigrún's, in the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*. Sigrún's maid performs the tasks of both the shepherd and the maid of *Skírnismál* in that when Helgi returns to his burial mound, it is the maid who greets him and describes his arrival on horse back:

Hvárt ero þat svik ein, er ek síá þikkiomz,  
eða ragna røk – ríða menn dauðir,  
er iða yðra oddom keyrið! –  
eða er hildingom heimfór gefin?

Is this some kind of delusion, that I think I can see  
dead men riding, or is it Ragnarok?  
Are you spurring your horses onward,  
or have the fighters been allowed to come home?<sup>692</sup>

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<sup>692</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.154; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 139.

Phillpotts described the further role of the maid when she noted that ‘on her return to Sigrún she indicates that the following scene will take place within the burial mound’<sup>693</sup>. The maid does this by saying:

Út gakk þú, Sigrún frá Sevafiðlóm,  
ef þik fólks iððar finna lystir!  
Upp er hagur lokinn: kominn er Helgi;  
dólgspor dreyra: döglingr bað þik,  
at þú sárdropa svefia skyldir.

Go outsider, Sigrun, out from Sefafell,  
if you want to meet the leader of the army;  
the mound has opened up, Helgi has come;  
his wounds are bleeding, the prince asks you  
to staunch his injuries.<sup>694</sup>

Therefore, according to Phillpotts, the purpose of the maid was to let the listener know that Helgi is mounted and where the scenes are taking place. It must be noted here that these strophes of the maid are preceded by a short prose section explaining that Helgi has ridden home to his mound. Does this make the role of the maid redundant?<sup>695</sup> Phillpotts provided an explanation in the final theme section below.<sup>696</sup>

A parallel theme to these supernumerary characters is what Phillpotts loosely classified as ‘theriomorphic personages’. She applied this classification to all the characters in the *Poetic Edda* that are animals, regardless of whether or not they have an active or speaking role within the poem in which they appear. For examples she cited the otter, pike, birds, dwarves and dragon within the Sigurd trilogy, the various mounts the gods bring to Baldr’s funeral, the boar and wolf in *Hyndluljóð*, the horse

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<sup>693</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 110.

<sup>694</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.155; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 139

<sup>695</sup> The prose of *Lokasenna* fulfils the strophes of Beyla in a similar fashion.

<sup>696</sup> See page 291.

from *Skírnismál*, and the wolf-riding troll and talking bird in the *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. Phillpotts argued that ‘such bird and beast personages are characteristic of primitive literature and have been discarded by heroic poetry, whose interest lies with man and his relations with other men’.<sup>697</sup> Phillpotts went on to reason that the poems that contain these types of characters have ‘an additional indication of their popular origin’.<sup>698</sup> This argument, though she did not specifically cite it in this section, is a preview of Phillpotts overall theory for the origins of the *Poetic Edda* as a whole. She concluded that these theriomorphic personages are possible indicators of the type of totems worshiped in early Norse society.<sup>699</sup> Furthermore, this totemic stage of development ends with the rise of heroic poetry, when the poets begin to focus on the interaction between fellow human beings and not the interaction between humans and nature.<sup>700</sup>

### **Stock Scenes and Disguises**

After concluding her section on supernumerary characters, Phillpotts goes on to argue that ‘the continual recurrence of stock scene is of course a characteristic of primitive drama’.<sup>701</sup> By this she meant that there are scenes of specific types of interactions that happen in multiple poems and that these types can be found in most ancient dramas. The characters or participants may change, but the general result is the same. Phillpotts argued that many of the *Poetic Edda* narratives can be divided into one of three categories:

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<sup>697</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 115.

<sup>698</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 115.

<sup>699</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 194.

<sup>700</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 115.

<sup>701</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 114.

- 1) Poems that culminate in a death or slaying. This can also include a funeral or a character's reappearance as a ghost. According to Phillpotts, the following poems fit into this category: '*Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, *Brym's Lay*, *Balder's death*, *Thor's visit to Geirröð*, *Heimdallargaldr*, *Hrúngnismál*, *Hjaðningamál*, *Káruljóð*. If the giantess is destroyed by fire in *Hyndluljóð* as seems probable, we must add that poem to the number.'
- 2) Poems that culminate in a wooing or love-scene. These Phillpotts lists as: '*Skírnismál*, the Sigurd trilogy, the *Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane*, the *Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson*.'
- 3) Poems that are based around flytings, namely *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*.<sup>702</sup>

Phillpotts readily acknowledged that several poems contain elements of more than one category. For example, though she labeled the Sigurd trilogy (*Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífomál*) as representative of the second category, she admitted that the second part of the trilogy, *Fáfnismál*, does end with slayings.

Even if one accepts that these groupings are representative of typical early drama (a concept Phillpotts does not explain), one must ask what type of drama was it. Phillpotts argued that a specific pattern of scenes can be seen in several of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* that are a reflection of the fertility drama which she believed was acted out by many cultures across the world.<sup>703</sup> This pattern speaks more to the influence that her fellow scholars were having upon her rather than offering much insight into early Nordic drama, since she thought the heroic narratives were likely transcribed to text directly from oral narratives and not dramatic performances. However, Phillpotts maintained that they could still show

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<sup>702</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 112.

<sup>703</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 144.



features of the fertility drama in the Nordic countries, even if they had been ‘recast in a new metre by poets accustomed to the imported heroic lay’.<sup>704</sup>

As with Murray’s six stages of drama that reflect the life cycle of the *E-D*, Phillpotts divided the Nordic heroic epics into five stages, utilizing the stock scenes she identified above:

- (i) A slaying by the bridegroom. The slain man is a kinsman of either bride or bridegroom, usually a brother;
- (ii) The implication that this slaying is in some way the bride’s doing;
- (iii) A flyting;
- (iv) A love-scene;
- (v) Hints of resurrection.

To support this categorization, Phillpotts referenced several narratives from Saxo and lost poems such as *Káruljóð*, but more importantly for our *Poetic Edda* focus, *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana* and *Helgaqviða Hiqrvarðzsonar*. She explained *Helgaqviða Hiqrvarðzsonar* as follows:

- (i) The slaying within the family is burked [avoided]. As Heðinn had sworn to wed his brother’s bride, he must have contemplated killing his brother. But the poet, who could hardly face Sváva’s marriage to Heðinn at the end, could not permit her to marry the slayer of her husband and a fratricide, and so allows Helgi to fall by the hand of another.
- (ii) The implication that the slaying is in some way due to the woman is given in the prose statement that Helgi’s valkyrie bride Sváva gave him a sword. It is moreover a woman who incites Heðinn to utter his oath.
- (iii) Part of the flyting, in the original chant-metre, is between the hero Helgi and a giantess Hríngerð.
- (iv) Love-scene, str. 40-43.

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<sup>704</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 144.

- (v) A hint of resurrection (and of Helgi's re-capture of his bride) is given in the prose statement at the end: "*It is said that Helgi and Sváva were reborn.*" <sup>705</sup>

Evidence from *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana* is then summarized:

- (i) At Sigrún's appeal Helgi slays Höðbrodd, who has been plighted to her by her father. This involves Helgi's fighting with and killing her father and one of her brothers. Nevertheless Sigrún marries Helgi. The brother who he had spared, Dag, kills Helgi.
- (ii) The one remaining chant-metre strophe makes Helgi declare Sigrún responsible for the fighting, as indeed she clearly is, according to the story.
- (iii) Flyting between Guðmund (brother of Höðbrodd) and Sinfjötli, a companion of Helgi's. Helgi puts an end to it by reproving Sinfjötli for hurling abuse at his enemies. In the *First Lay* the flyting is much longer and the vituperation much coarser, and to judge by that in the *Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson*, which is in the original metre, this version is nearer to the original. It is probable that the *remanieur* of the *Second Lay* curtailed and bowdlerized the flyting scene.
- (iv) There is a beautiful love-scene between Helgi's ghosts and Sigrún, str. 43-49.
- (v) The resurrection is within the compass of the poem, besides being further emphasized by the prose statement at the end: "*Sigrún died young of sorrow and weariness. It was believed in old times that men were born again, but now that is called an old wives' tale. It is said that Helgi and Sigrún were born again: he was then called Helgi the Hadding warrior and she Kára Hálfðan's daughter, as is told in Kárljóð, and she was a valkyrie.* [sic]" <sup>706</sup>

In her direct analysis of *Helgaqviða*, Phillpotts stated:

the poem is no crude magical mummary, but a piece of exquisite literature.  
Imaginative sympathy has transmuted the old story and altered its values, so

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<sup>705</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 146.

<sup>706</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 147. Phillpotts does not close the quote with the ”.

that only the form of the Year-Drama remains: the spirit which infuses the poem is akin, in its dignity and restraint, to the spirit of Greek tragedy. The slain Helgi is not revived by the hocus-pocus of the folk-drama or the mummery of its predecessor, but by the bitter grief of his bride.<sup>707</sup>

This section of Phillpotts's scholarship is difficult to follow, but her argument is basically that these heroic poems were a severely altered version of a previous drama based upon characters and rituals similar to the vegetation spirit of Frazer or the yearly rituals that the Ritualists saw as a source for the *E-D*. Therefore, they are indicative of early Norse cultural beliefs. These beliefs, however, are difficult to ascertain because as time passed, the Norse came to place the significant focus of the poems on their human interactions and so the ritual origin is barely noticeable in the poems' current forms.

Phillpotts's penultimate theme was disguises. She cited that within the *Poetic Edda*, Óðinn adopts different guises in *Grimnismál*, *Hávamál*, *Hárbarðzljóð*, *Regnismál* and *Vafthrúðnismál*. Þórr has similar practices in *Hárbarðzljóð* and *Brymsqviða*. In *Hyndlolióð*, Freyja disguises Óttar as her boar. Fránmarr assumes the shape of a bird in *Helgakviða Hjörvarzsonar* and in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, 'Helgi is presumably disguised in some way in the first strophe, and in the next scene we see him clad as a bond-woman.'<sup>708</sup> In the *Húsdrápa*, Heimdallr and Loki both disguise themselves as seals, though the authenticity of this detail is questionable.<sup>709</sup> In the lost poem *Káruljóð*, the title character Kára assumes the form of a swan and in a later version of the story Hrómund puts on a goat beard before going into battle. Concerning *Fáfnismál*, Phillpotts argued: 'it seems more than probable that Sigurd is in animal disguise when he slays Fafnir and replies to the

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<sup>707</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 148.

<sup>708</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 116

<sup>709</sup> Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 184.

dragon's enquiry as to his name that he is called "Göfugt dýr," or "stately animal".<sup>710</sup> Since his name translates to having an animal component, Phillpotts was reasoning that his appearance reflected that as well.

This theme unfortunately gets the smallest exposition from Phillpotts. She was presumably trying to illustrate two points concerning the use of disguises. First, and most obviously, that they are used within the *Poetic Edda*, more specifically in the mythological works, thereby suggesting that the narratives they appear in were previously dramatic productions where the actors made use of disguises.<sup>711</sup> She stated:

such bird and beast personages are characteristic of primitive literature, and have been discarded by heroic poetry, whose interest lies with man and his relations with other men ... We must regard these beast and bird personages in the chant-metre poems as an additional indication of their popular origin.<sup>712</sup>

In keeping with her eventual conclusion, Phillpotts was arguing that the disguises used in Norse works are one of the elements that suggest that the dramatic rituals of the Norse could have been based on the totemic worship of animals.<sup>713</sup>

### **Prose**

Phillpotts's last major theme was the irregular use of prose passages throughout the *Poetic Edda*. Following Heusler and Sijmons, she subdivided the information given in prose format into three categories.<sup>714</sup> The first was annotations

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<sup>710</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 116

<sup>711</sup> Here Phillpotts demonstrates Murray's influence relating to his work on disguises in *Ancient Greek Literature* as was seen above.

<sup>712</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 115.

<sup>713</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 194.

<sup>714</sup> *Die Lieder der Edda*, ed. by B. Sijmons and Hugo Gering (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1971).

where the prose is used to ‘simply explain the situation and introduce the speaker, or connect the poem with what precedes and follows’. The second was when reproductions are needed for forgotten verses, for example ‘a good deal of the introduction to *Grímnismál* should probably be classed under this head’. Finally the third, and most important for Phillpotts, was what she called asides or passages that are ‘descriptive of the action implied in the verse’.<sup>715</sup> The three of these put together form her overall argument that the prose comments:

were composed in Iceland to elucidate action, change of scene, etc. which must have been perfectly clear to the original audience. We must therefore assume, not only that in the original home of the poems different speakers uttered the strophes assigned to different speakers, but that these speakers also acted—that is to say they moved about the scene in accordance with the actions indicated in the poem.<sup>716</sup>

In other words, the poems as we have them in written Icelandic form are not their original form. Phillpotts believed there was a previous stage where these narratives were performed, but never in Iceland. The prose seen in the present form of the poems was added by Icelanders to explain action which would previously have been acted out. This assertion leads to the ever-debated topic of where, geographically, the narratives in the *Poetic Edda* came from.

Phillpotts believed that the first two categories, of introduction or reproduction, are of obvious Icelandic origin and need no further argument. The third category of asides she granted is more complicated, but she thought a careful look at the instances where these asides are used, and more importantly where they are not used, demonstrated these, too, to be of Icelandic origin. In many cases,

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<sup>715</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 100.

<sup>716</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 108.

especially in *Lokasenna*, the information given by these asides is superfluous, where the topic the prose is concerned with has already been covered by a strophe preceding it. There are also instances where the prose commentator has missed a clear opportunity to clarify some action. A good example of this is found in *Skírnismál* where the prose commentator details Skírnir's journey into the land of the giants until he meets the shepherd outside the house of Gerðr's father. Once Skírnir has finished speaking to the shepherd, he must have spurred his horse to leap over a fiery wall which surrounds the house, and about which the reader was told previously in the poem, but about which the prose commentator is silent. Immediately following Skírnir's conversation with the shepherd, Gerðr is asking her maid who is creating noise outside her father's house, the implication being that Skírnir has already jumped the wall.<sup>717</sup>

Phillpotts pointed out more instances where the lack of commentary was curious, notably in *Alvíssmál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. The former contains no prose narration whatsoever. Phillpotts argued that the potential commentator displayed a 'curious indifference to the dramatic conclusion' of the poem by not making clear the action that the final strophe of the poem suggests, Alvíss' death.<sup>718</sup> She found this indifference again in *Vafþrúðnismál*, a poem that does contain narration, if only a single instance in the fifth strophe where the commentator informs the reader that Óðinn travelled to the hall of Im's father and went inside. Perhaps this commentator can be forgiven in the case of *Alvíssmál*, since the wording of the strophe does not say explicitly that Alvíss is killed. Þórr only says that he has tricked the dwarf and that sunshine is coming into the hall. However, in *Vafþrúðnismál* there are two strong indications that the contest between the two participants is one to the death.

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<sup>717</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 103.

<sup>718</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 105-106.

The first comes in the seventh strophe before any questions have been exchanged. As seen in the second chapter, Vafþrúðnir warns his guest: ‘‘Út þú né komir órom hollom frá, nema þú inn snotrari sér’, ‘may you not come out of our halls alive unless you turn out to be the wiser one.’<sup>719</sup> The second occurs in the giant’s final strophe, after he realizes he cannot answer Óðinn’s question. He states: ‘feigom munni mæltá ek mína forna stafl ok um ragna røk’, ‘with doomed mouth I’ve spoken my ancient lore about the fate of the gods’, a statement which reinforces the rules of the contest and seemingly suggests that Vafþrúðnir will die.<sup>720</sup> However, the commentator says nothing at this crucial moment. ‘We should expect the commentator to supply us with a prose account of this, somewhat as the prose at the end of *Grímnismál* tells of Geirröð’s death. But the dramatic catastrophe has apparently escaped his attention.’<sup>721</sup>

All of this leads Phillpotts to conclude:

The guidance of the prose commentators is therefore superfluous in a majority of cases, and where it is not superfluous it is inadequate. It is impossible to credit the original authors of the poems with such a combination of officiousness and helplessness.<sup>722</sup>

The assumption here is that by original authors she meant Norwegians, since she goes on to say that ‘we know that the Icelanders did not themselves practice the art of presenting incident in dialogues, and we may perhaps conclude that the prose comments were for the benefit of Icelandic audiences’.<sup>723</sup> She argued that the prose comments cannot have existed prior to the narratives coming to Iceland because ‘the

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<sup>719</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.45; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 41.

<sup>720</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.53; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 49.

<sup>721</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 105.

<sup>722</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 106.

<sup>723</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 106.

absence of explanation in passages where explanation is obviously needed certainly points to this conclusion, for it shows both that the Icelandic commentators could overlook references to action in the verse unless they were extremely clear'.<sup>724</sup> For example, consider the prose in the *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II* that directly precedes strophe forty (which contains the dialogue of Sigrún's maid quoted above in the section on supernumerary characters). The prose reads:

Ambót Sigrúnar gekk um aptan hiá haugi Helga ok sá, at Helgi reið til haugsins með marga menn.

One evening Sigrun's maid went past Helgi's mound and saw Helgi riding into the mound with a large number of men.<sup>725</sup>

Phillpotts's argument was that the Icelandic commentator who crafted the prose was only able to do so because the maid is quite clear in strophe forty and forty-two that she saw men riding and doing so around Helgi's mound. Because it was clear cut, the commentator could add prose. Had it been ambiguous, there would be no prose. Therefore, for the Norwegians viewing the dramatic performance, the maid, serving as a supernumerary character, let them know the scene had changed. The Icelanders however, added the benefit of prose from a commentator to let them know, as they read the poem, that the scene had changed.

### Themes Critique

There are several issues with the themes Phillpotts put forward as illustrative of a dramatic origin for the *Poetic Edda* poems, as well as one major, fatal, flaw in her method of argumentation. In giving examples of her themes, Phillpotts was

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<sup>724</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 106.

<sup>725</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p.154; *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, p. 139.



fairly thorough about providing what she saw as supporting evidence from the *Poetic Edda* and similar Old Norse narratives. However, in almost every section, her stated goal was to argue that these themes are an indication of what she called ‘primitive’, ‘popular’ or ‘dramatic’ origin.<sup>726</sup> The fundamental flaw to her argument is that she never sufficiently explains what she meant by popular origin or gives any examples of it. Throughout all of the themes discussed above, only in her discussion of the prose comments did she provide an example outside of the Old Norse sources.<sup>727</sup> Her main comparative argument was that the prose asides appear very similar to content found in Elizabethan drama from medieval England. In a fifteenth-century Chester play, Phillpotts found examples of stage directions that ‘are of just the same type as in the Edda’.<sup>728</sup> This, however, was the only parallel that Phillpotts drew. The reader is left to their own assumptions as to where Elizabethan drama and Chester plays fit in the history of drama as a whole. With a little research, she might have been able to argue that the typical ‘Vice’ character of early English plays, which is most often the character who speaks the asides to the audience, bears striking resemblance to Cornford’s Imposter.<sup>729</sup> This drastic oversight is even more striking if one considers the many potential supporting examples early Greek and Roman theatre could have provided her with, especially since these genres were subject to a great deal of attention during her scholarly career. One simple example is that of disguise. The mask was an essential part of the Greek theatre, and one needs only to look back to Aristototele for evidence of such.<sup>730</sup>

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<sup>726</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 93, 110, 114, 115, 117.

<sup>727</sup> In which I include Saxo, despite his use of Latin instead of Old Norse.

<sup>728</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 107.

<sup>729</sup> Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 89-90. See p. 144-46 for specifics on mystery or miracle plays such as those at Chester.

<sup>730</sup> Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry*, p. 21.

As to specific problems within the themes, several points should be made. Though she explained her reasoning for believing the prose to have been composed in Iceland, in her arguments for a commentator adding the prose for the benefit of Icelanders, her presentation reads as if a single commentator added all of the prose found in the CR and AM manuscripts. While this is hypothetically possible, Phillpotts provided no rationale for her position.<sup>731</sup>

On the topic of clarity, a large part of Phillpotts's arguments regarding theriomorphic personages, and eventually totemism, are based on the events of Baldr's funeral. However, there is a reference problem that occurs several times throughout Phillpotts's scholarship that affects these arguments. She cited 'the poem of the death of Balder', but was willing to overlook the inherent dilemma with this poem. What she was referring to here and elsewhere in her text is not the poem *Baldurs draumar*, or *Vǫlospá*. Instead she drew on a single strophe quotation made by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*:

Þókk mun gráta þurru tárur Baldars bálfarar.  
Kyks né dauðs nautka ek karls sonar: haldi Hel því er hefir.

Thanks will weep dry tears for Baldr's burial. No good got I from the old one's son either dead or alive. Let Hel hold what she has.<sup>732</sup>

Phillpotts assumed this strophe came from a larger work and that the larger work formed the basis of Snorri's prose explanation of those present at Baldr's funeral.<sup>733</sup> As an argument, there is nothing wrong with this. However, Phillpotts took for

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<sup>731</sup> Questions could be asked about whether the time period of this potential commentary is important. Was it done before or after the Christianity conversion of Iceland?

<sup>732</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 48; *Edda*, trans. by Faulkes, p. 51.

<sup>733</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 24.

granted that this ‘lost’ poem actually existed and that it must have contained all of the elements that Snorri included in his *Gylfaginning* narrative.

There are several problems with her reasoning. One, Snorri’s reliability as a source is certainly not something all scholars agree upon.<sup>734</sup> This strophe could easily have been made up as there are no other references to it outside of Snorri’s work.<sup>735</sup> Snorri also does not reference the name of the original poem he is quoting, as he usually does with excerpts from the *Poetic Edda*, such as the ones he used from *Grímnismál* and *Völuspá*.<sup>736</sup> Regardless of whether there ever was a lost poem, another issue still exists: ‘the poem of the death of Baldr’ is not in the Codex Regius version of the *Poetic Edda*, and that collection is the main source informing all of Phillpotts’s text. Phillpotts admitted that she herself had doubts as to the genuine nature of Snorri’s quotation when, in discussing the burial scene, she said, ‘the whole proceeding seems rather like a game which Snorri had either seen himself or had had described to him—for the dialogic poem could hardly have described all the spectators at the funeral’.<sup>737</sup> And yet she still used Snorri’s description as a key citation in her argument for the use of theriomorphic personages.

### *Constituent Parts of Drama*

Though there are aspects of her themes where further explanation would help, Phillpotts did acknowledge that it would be impossible to argue for dramatic origin without explaining the potential constituent parts. While one cannot impose

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<sup>734</sup> For example, see the above citation (p. 155) of Bugge, *The Home of the Eddic Poems*, who argues that Snorri’s retelling of events had been heavily influenced by Christianity. For the other side, see Georges Dumézil, *Loki* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1948), pp. 61-83; and Karl Hauck, *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern* (Munich: Fink, 1970), p. 156 for archaeological and comparative arguments validating Snorri’s accounts.

<sup>735</sup> There are, however, references that can be found to the themes within the lost narrative, such as the weeping for Baldr which appears in the *Hrafn’s Saga ok Þorvaldz* section of the *Sturlunga Saga*. *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. by Vigfusson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), p. 175.

<sup>736</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, pp. 20, 22.

<sup>737</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 129.

all the rules of modern drama upon a hypothetical original, some components are essential for it to qualify as a theatrical drama and Phillpotts did provide arguments for who or what the actors, authors, chorus and scene might have been in the possible productions.<sup>738</sup>

### **Actors**

Concerning actors, Phillpotts argued that ‘not more than three human actors played speaking parts on the stage at the same time’.<sup>739</sup> The main exception she found in the *Poetic Edda* occurs in *Lokasenna* when over a dozen speaking characters are in the same room at the same time. To account for this, Phillpotts suggested that early Nordic drama uses two different techniques for character representation. First, there are actual human beings that perform the recitation of words. Second, there are effigies to represent certain characters, often the major deities, who are present in the scene but not constantly active participants.

Phillpotts argued that the key to understanding the development of human actors in Old Norse drama revolves around the term *pulr* or ‘thul’. Based on the work of Olrik, she argued that before the title *goði* came into use (for secular, heathen priests prior to the Christian conversion), there was a tradition of Norse ‘priest-kings’ who held the title *pulr*. Both titles would in time be replaced by the warrior-king title of *konungr*.<sup>740</sup> Phillpotts then extended her argument, moving it closer to the work of Harrison, by saying that this *pulr* was not only the king of a community and responsible for its fertility, but may also have been the original actor

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<sup>738</sup> A good link for Phillpotts would have been to include the analysis of the constituent parts of Greek drama found in Murray, *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*, pp. 203-210.

<sup>739</sup> She does not extend the argument to all of the Poetic Edda because the borrowed elements of the Nibelungen poems contain multiple simultaneous speakers. Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 177.

<sup>740</sup> Olrik, *Danske Studier*, 1909, pp. 1 as cited in Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 180.

in Nordic drama.<sup>741</sup> In the earliest form of Norse drama, she argued that the actors were tragic human figures themselves who, in the course of the early rituals which would become dramas, impersonated gods and giants and then suffered the same fate as those they portrayed. If the god died in the narrative, so did the human actor recreating it.

This is an obvious example of Frazer's influence on Phillpotts's thinking, as a doomed actor is very similar to what Frazer detailed in the system of sacral kingship found in *The Golden Bough*. Phillpotts argued that in *Ynglingatal* we see 'memories of the past to show us that once the chief male actors were responsible to their people for the fruitfulness of the earth. They were the king and his slayer, the king-to-be.'<sup>742</sup> However, over time this character moved from a king-like position to something closer to a sage or wise man. 'In course of time it would become natural for the *thul*, who stood in specially intimate relations with the divine world, to be regarded as the repository of ancient traditions, the instructors of the people in all kinds of divine lore.'<sup>743</sup> In other words, the fertility king would eventually begin to be seen more as a religious, priest figure. The evolution of this figure's role did not stop there. Phillpotts argued that this instructive priest-king figure developed into a general speaker or performer and evidence of this could be seen in several instances.

The title is by no means a common one and, in the contexts where it is found, its meaning can be ambiguous. For examples outside the *Poetic Edda*, the term can be found on the Snoldelev standing stone in Denmark where the inscription reads: 'Gunwalds sten, sonaR Roalds, þulaR a Salhøgum.'<sup>744</sup> Phillpotts believes the 'þulaR' in this instance can either mean 'priest' or, following the controversial

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<sup>741</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 181.

<sup>742</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 180.

<sup>743</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 184.

<sup>744</sup> DR 248 in the Rundata catalog. The complete catalog is available online at <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>.

Wimmer, a ‘speaker of religion’, supporting the idea of the later evolution of the character.<sup>745</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith*, the king of the Rondings tribe is said to be ‘Pyle’ or ‘Thul’. But the best example, without doubt, comes from *Beowulf*.<sup>746</sup> The character Unferð carries the title *pyle* and has a curious position in the king’s court. Phillpotts pointed out that the author of *Beowulf* displays deliberate disgust for the act of fratricide in the description of the character Hæthcyn’s accidental killing of his brother, Herebeald. Hæthcyn is hanged as a result of his actions. However, Unferð is rumored to have committed the same sort of act, and curiously he is seen in a position of honour. This might possibly be part of a tradition similar to Frazer’s king-slayer, but Phillpotts did not extend the argument this far.

Within the *Poetic Edda*, Phillpotts found several key examples of the term. In strophe 111 of *Hávamál* the speaker states: ‘Mál er at þylia þular stóli á’, which Phillpotts translated as: ‘It is time to speak on the (or my?) *thul*’s seat.’ Then again in strophe 134, the speaker says: ‘at három þul hlæðu aldregi’, ‘laugh thou never at hoary *thul*.’ The title *fimbulþulr* is also found in strophes 80 and 142 which Phillpotts translated as ‘chief or mighty’ *thul*.<sup>747</sup> In the ninth strophe of *Vafþrúðnismál*, the giant says to Óðinn: ‘þá scal freista, hvárr fleira viti, gestr eða inn gamli þulr’, ‘we shall see which of us knows the more, the guest (Odin) or the ancient *thul*.’<sup>748</sup> Finally, the third bird in *Fáfnismál* speaks of Reginn, telling Sigurðr: ‘Hofði scemra láti hann inn hára þul fara til heliar heðan’, which Phillpotts

<sup>745</sup> Wimmer suggested that the swastika found isolated on one side of the stone was originally a symbol for Óðinn. Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 180.

<sup>746</sup> For an in-depth analysis of her thoughts on *Beowulf*, see Bertha Phillpotts, ‘Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought’, in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R.D. Fulk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 1-13.

<sup>747</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, pp. 34, 39 and Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 182. Larrington translates the term as ‘sage’. *Poetic Edda*, trans. by Larrington, pp. 29, 33, 41, 163. This would not be outside Phillpotts general evolution of the term, given that she argued it had a time when it meant a learned imparter of wisdom.

<sup>748</sup> *Edda*, ed. by Neckel, p. 47; Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 182.

translated as ‘advising Sigurd to send “the hoary thul” to Hel and shorten him by a head.’<sup>749</sup>

There is no consensus on how this title should be translated, nor is Phillpotts even able to provide a comprehensive survey of possible meanings for the term. She pointed out that in present usage, in her time, the term was usually thought to mean ‘wandering singer’, but she went on to argue that in some cases it might be more akin to simply a ‘speaker’. The idea that the title refers to a special type of speaker is reinforced by the observation that a special chair or seat is reserved for a thul. However, once again Phillpotts qualified her own argument by going on to say: ‘to suppose that Reginn habitually sat on a special seat and disbursed wisdom is ridiculous.’<sup>750</sup> For the *Hávamál* speaker, she agreed with Sijmons’s argument ‘that the speaker and author is a “spielmann,” a wandering minstrel who makes his appeal to his audience by roguishly impersonating Odin [...] in the course of his solemnly uttered exhortation to regard discretion as the better part of valour, he repeatedly urges the audience not to laugh at him.’<sup>751</sup> She reasoned that Óðinn was the *fimbulþulr* due to the title’s apparent ability to inscribe magic runes or staves. However, in *Vafþrúðnismál*, she argued that it would be strange for Vafþrúðnir to call himself a wandering singer in his own home, and therefore ‘he may be referring to himself as one who “speaks” his part, i.e. an actor’.<sup>752</sup>

In later Skaldic literature, though Phillpotts gave no examples of it, she argued that the title started to be used for the skalds or poets instead of for

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<sup>749</sup> Edda, ed. by Neckel, p. 186; Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 182.

<sup>750</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 183. Why this is ridiculous she does not elaborate, a fact that is odd given that chapter thirteen of the *Völsungasaga* describes Reginn as a skilled teacher of Sigurðr.

<sup>751</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 183.

<sup>752</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 182.

characters. This led her to the following chronological progression of ideas about *pulr/pyle*:

- 1) The term was originally used as the name of a king;
- 2) It then became a term for a priest;
- 3) From there it became the ‘speaker’ in the poems seen above;
- 4) Finally it became a designation for a poet.<sup>753</sup>

The speaker as lead actor is a key ingredient for a dramatic origin argument, but one still needs to account for instances where multiple characters are present in a narrative. Phillpotts argued that these are represented by effigies instead of actual people. She based her position on several points. First, in several of the poems the action is carried out by the lesser characters while the main gods are stationary, literally. In *Skírnismál*, the gods Niðrðr, Skaði and Freyr all direct the action, but are figures who have no apparent movement in the poem. It is Skírnir who moves from scene to scene. Similarly, Phillpotts argued that in the lost poem that Snorri quotes concerning Gná, it appears that Gná fulfills the same role for Frigg as Skírnir does for Freyr.<sup>754</sup>

*Lokasenna* is the real test for Phillpotts, in terms of the number of speaking roles. Though the number of characters is numerous, almost all of them are sitting throughout the poem, or at least there is little suggestion of movement. The prominent exceptions to this come in the characters of Viðarr, Sif, Þórr and Loki himself.<sup>755</sup> Phillpotts suggested that Loki always was an acted character and that he often functions similarly to Skírnir and Gná in a messenger capacity. Furthermore,

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<sup>753</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 183.

<sup>754</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 176.

<sup>755</sup> Note, however, that all of their supposed movements, into the hall, pouring drinks, etc., are attested to by the prose comments, a fact not discussed by Phillpotts.



concerning Loki, Phillpotts observed: ‘in the lost poem on Balder’s death only Hother and Loki move—or rather—and this may be significant—Loki moves Hother’s arm. The other gods do not even stir when Balder falls, and in the funeral scene Thor is the only god who does more than “stand by”’.<sup>756</sup> The suggestion is clear that there may have been a minimal number of moving characters in many scenes, but this once again references the hypothetical lost poem on Baldr.

The use of effigies is not something that was unknown in the Nordic countries and Phillpotts provided several examples. An English Franciscan monk of the later thirteenth century was told by a Danish colleague about a practice of certain Danish women:

On one such occasion when a number of women were gathered together they collected a bundle of straw and gave it the likeness of a man with arms of straw, put a hood and belt on it and called it Bovi. There-upon they began their ring-dance, two women leapt and sang with him between them [...]<sup>757</sup>

This example is vital to Phillpotts’s argument as it shows not only the use of an effigy, but also the actions of the human participants or actors. Another example is contained in Snorri’s summary of a lost poem that Phillpotts called *Hrungrismál*.<sup>758</sup> In this narrative, a giant is made out of clay with a mare’s heart. His role is to compete with Þórr and protect the character Hrungrir. According to Phillpotts: ‘very probably this figure represented Hrungrir himself, Thor’s antagonist, in the actual drama, and only became an accessory after the dramatic tradition was lost.’<sup>759</sup> One

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<sup>756</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>757</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 123, 178.

<sup>758</sup> This poem name is not attested elsewhere, and Snorri only claims that his account is based on Þjóðólfr’s *Haustlǫng*. *Edda*, ed. by Faulkes, p. 22. For a discussion of *Haustlǫng* see Anne Holtsmark, ‘Myten om Idun og Tjatse I Tjodolvs *Haustlǫng*,’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 64 (1949).

<sup>759</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 178.

assumes she meant that the Hrungrir character would have originally been a clay effigy on stage when the narrative was first formed. Later, the crafted giant enters the narrative as a 3<sup>rd</sup> character, in addition to Thor and Hrungrir, once it became literature and not drama. In the *Flateyjarbók*, one finds examples of a ‘wooden effigy called Thorgarð, furnished with a human heart cut out of a man killed for the purpose, sent by Earl Hákon to Iceland to kill his enemy Thorleif’ and wooden statues being placed in Freyr’s grave mound to represent him.<sup>760</sup> Therefore, iconic representations or stand-ins were certainly known in Old Norse culture.

Wooden figures representing the gods were also common. Phillpotts referenced a narrative concerning Olaf Tryggvason saying that he was ‘reported to have encountered a statue of Thor which could not only speak and walk, but could even wrestle with him’.<sup>761</sup> Continuing with the theme of wrestling, she referenced the experiences of Gunnarr Helming, also in *Flateyjarbók*, where he wrestles with a statue of Freyr that has come alive. Phillpotts believed that these instances are indications of a tradition of using physical objects to stand in for characters when a narrative is being acted out. It is curious that Phillpotts did not reference the hollow image of Þórr that Óláfr Haraldsson (Saint Óláfr) is supposed to have encountered. In the 112<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Óláfs saga Helga*, Snorri relates how the son of a man named Guthbrand described the statue: ‘he has a hammer in his hand and is of great size and hollow inside, and he stands on a kind of pedestal when he is outside. There is a profusion of gold and silver upon him. He receives four loaves of bread every

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<sup>760</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 178.

<sup>761</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 178-179. It is unclear which version of *Olaf Tryggvason’s Saga* Phillpotts is referring to. In Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, where one version of the narrative is contained, there is no episode where Tryggvason meets a moving, speaking and wrestling Þórr, only a immobile statue in the sixth-ninth chapter. In the *Fornmannor Saga*, an individual comes aboard Tryggvason’s ship and wrestles with the king’s men, but never the king himself. He speaks briefly with Tryggvason and then jumps overboard. *Heimskringla*, ed. by Jónsson, p. 154.

day and also fresh meat.’<sup>762</sup> In the following chapter, the local farmers bring the statue outside to an assembly with Ólaf where, when the sun rises, Ólaf has his associate Kolbein strike the statue: ‘so he fell to pieces, and out jumped mice as big as cats, and adders, and snakes.’<sup>763</sup> Since Phillpotts was trying to demonstrate the tradition of using symbolic effigies in early Nordic society, this example is a significant oversight.

Finally, Phillpotts described a 1917 excavation find from Sjælland that she felt was a perfect representation of what might have been used in dramatic productions. She described it as ‘a seated figure about eighteen inches high, with its hands in its lap, and evidently originally affixed to a stand or pedestal. The huge torque round the neck of the figure dates it as between the fifth and eighth centuries’.<sup>764</sup> She argued that it can be classed as an effigy because of its:

general resemblance to the description of little wooden figures which were objects of veneration in Southern Norway until the eighteenth century. Their direct descent from heathen idols seems to follow from the fact that one of them is said to have been regularly rubbed with fat up to 1777 or later.<sup>765</sup>

Phillpotts could have also cited the 1907 find in Rällinge, Sweden of a similar 9cm seated figure that is thought to be a depiction of Freyr. The figure is a seated, cross-legged, bearded male with an erect phallus. It is wearing a peaked hat and a long beard.<sup>766</sup>

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<sup>762</sup> *Heimskringla*, trans. by Hollander, p. 372.

<sup>763</sup> *Heimskringla*, trans. by Hollander, p. 374.

<sup>764</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 179.

<sup>765</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 179.

<sup>766</sup> Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: University of Uppsala Press, 2002), p. 220.

In true comparative style, she noted that effigies are commonly used in dramas throughout the world. ‘Drama in which the parts are taken by puppets exists in Russia, Persia, and in the Far East. In Japan the marionettes of the *Nō* plays are supposed to have developed from idols.’<sup>767</sup> However, she did not provide a timeline or location for this evidence, or any indication how this relates to Old Norse drama other than similarity.<sup>768</sup>

The need for actors and even the presence of authors in a drama is understandable. One might think only the setting remains to be addressed, but first, as seen with the Ritualists, the use of multiple members, as possibly a form of chorus, needs to be explored.

### **Chorus**

A chorus as an element in Nordic drama is a difficult concept as there are no obvious examples of it. Yet Phillpotts argued that a clue lies in folk-plays which she identified as the descendants of early Teutonic fertility dramas; the actual works she classified as folk-plays are unfortunately left unspecified. She did state, however, that ‘there is invariably an indefinite number of other minor actors, whose *rôle* is usually limited to singing, dancing or sword-play, almost invariably in a beast disguise’. Because of this, she found it probable that the Eddic dramas would have also had a chorus, likely in animal disguise, which sang or danced in ways that can be seen as survivals in later Nordic culture.<sup>769</sup> One example she returned to is that of Baldr’s funeral and the mass of animal characters and giants that were in attendance. She argued that Þórr’s act of kicking a dwarf into the fire is similar to a

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<sup>767</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 179.

<sup>768</sup> In fact, her work would have benefited greatly from a section explaining what she perceived to be the difference between effigies, idols, puppets and statues. These all figure in her scholarship, but she seems to use them interchangeably as though they all refer to the same thing.

<sup>769</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 185.

Swedish game involving dancing around massive fir bonfires, described by the sixteenth century scholar Olaus Magnus in his *A Description of the Northern Peoples*:

All the bravest men who have been sitting round the fires are roused as if by drums and turn to dancing in a circle and leaping. They draw themselves so tightly together and dance with such immense vigour that inevitably anyone who is last in line will fall into the fire ... He jumps out at once and, to the applause of the dancers, is set upon a high seat, where, because he has invaded the royal fire, he must swallow down a great big jug of very strong beer, and afterwards a second.<sup>770</sup>

During Phillpotts's time, this sort of ring dance in Nordic counties was thought to be an importation from France, a feature that accompanied the French ballads. However, she thought that an argument could be made for such a dance being known among Nordic people much earlier. One example was that of the Danish women and the straw Bovi figure they would dance around, which she felt had to be a survival. To this Phillpotts added the Roman historian Priscus's account of how, in 446 A.D., what she labeled as 'Gothic maidens' received Attila the Hun by 'dancing in a ring and singing in their native tongue'.<sup>771</sup> Another early example came from Gregory the Great's 579 A.D. text, in which he 'describes the Langobardians dancing in a circle round the head of a she-goat which they had sacrificed to the devil', to which Phillpotts added that 'dancing round an uprooted

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<sup>770</sup> Olaus Magnus, trans. by Fisher, II, p. 752.

<sup>771</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 186. Also see *Fragmenta Historicorum Græcorum*, ed. by Ambrosio Firmin Didot (Paris: Royal French Institute, 1841), pp. 70-99.

tree, or tree-trunk, must have been common in Scandinavia as early as the Viking Age, since the Lapps borrowed the custom at that period'.<sup>772</sup>

Finally, Phillpotts cited the 10<sup>th</sup> century work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus who describes a dance performed by East Germanic tribesmen, whom she believed to be either Goths or Varangians, at the Byzantine Court. On the ninth day of Yule, two groups of dancers, dressed in animal skins and masks with spears and shields, dance around the Emperor's table. 'They then form two circles, one within the other, and in this formation seem to dance thrice round the table of the Emperor: they then retire, while "those who out of the two groups represent the Goths recite aloud the so-called Gothic chant, the instrument players giving the time."'<sup>773</sup> While she admitted that this routine had been tailored to fit the Byzantine Court, Phillpotts believed the basic elements of masked East Germanic performers dancing around the leaders was sufficient evidence of what a chorus could have looked like in ancient Scandinavian ritual drama, thus providing evidence that the ring dance was not of French import.<sup>774</sup> While this suggests a tradition of a ring-dance chorus in parts of Norse lands, there still is no clear evidence of them in the *Poetic Edda*.

### Scene

For the final element of a dramatic production, the scene, Phillpotts argued that there is little doubt that these productions were made in close proximity to early temples and grave-mounds. 'The extant poems of the Edda seem to allot their scenes fairly equally to halls, which we may take to mean temples, or to places where there

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<sup>772</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 179.

<sup>773</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>774</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 187.

are grave-mounds.<sup>775</sup> That the Nordic hall is a frequent setting in the *Poetic Edda* is not in doubt, but extending this to say that means temples is a large leap.<sup>776</sup>

The majority of events in poems of the *Poetic Edda*, including but not limited to *Grimnismál*, *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál*, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, all take place within a hall. Grave-mounds also appear fairly frequently in the narratives. When Loki flies to the lands of the giants in *Þrymsqviða*, he finds Þrymr sitting on a grave-mound holding court. In *Skírnismál*, the shepherd is in a similar position at the entrance to Gymir's hall, sitting on a mound. The hero Helgi in *Helgaqviða Híorvarðssonar* is sitting on a grave-mound when he encounters the Valkyrie, Sváva for the first time. And in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, the entirety of the later parts of the poem involves the comings and goings of characters to a grave-mound. Though they are not in Phillpotts's examples, one could easily add *Völuspá* and *Baldur's draumar* since the events of the narrative of both are based around an unearthed corpse. *Alvíssmál* is another possibility since Þórr accuses Alvið of spending the night with a corpse.

Phillpotts pointed out that 'many stories show that a grave-mound was the regular seat of prehistoric Scandinavian kings, and it cannot surprise us that Helgi Híorvarðsson should be seated on one. Thrym may have been following royal precedent.'<sup>777</sup> This being the case, the shepherd of *Skírnismál* presents a problem. He is not royalty of any kind; for Phillpotts he was just a supernumerary character to assist the audience. She therefore reasoned instead that the grave-mound must have

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<sup>775</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 188.

<sup>776</sup> For an introduction to different types of Nordic/Germanic temples and their possible uses, see Walther Gehl, 'Das Problem des germanischen Tempels,' *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 78 (1941), pp. 37-49.

<sup>777</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 189.

been present where *Skírnismál* was performed, that it ‘was the most convenient spot to place a character who was to be “discovered seated”’.<sup>778</sup>

An interpretive dimension that comes along with locating the original dramatic productions around grave-mounds is that it creates the suggestion that these productions originated as a result of ancestor worship, an idea championed by Ridgeway as was seen previously.<sup>779</sup> Phillpotts acknowledged that ‘dramatic performances may be closely associated with the tombs of heroes, and ultimately perhaps be performed in honour of them, and yet originate in something very different from propitiation of the dead’.<sup>780</sup> Phillpotts argued that though the rituals performed at sites such as Uppsala, with its grave-mounds believed to contain dead kings, appear to be commemorative of those kings, that the ritual was actually a magical performance originally intended to assure fertility. Early kings were actors in this performance, but it was the performance that assured the fertility, not the specific actor. This is why in narratives such as the *Ynglingatal*, the fertility focus continued even when the chief actor changed.<sup>781</sup>

### **Constituent Parts Critique**

Having considered all the parts, a complete picture can be formed of Phillpotts’s thinking as to what early Norse drama might have looked like. The event would have taken place at a temple, hall or grave mound, depending on the narrative being portrayed. There would be one main actor and no more than two

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<sup>778</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 189. Some of the mounds at Gamala Uppsala had flattened tops that may have been used for staging a performance or demonstration. H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), p. 19.

<sup>779</sup> See pages 250-251.

<sup>780</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 195.

<sup>781</sup> The fine line between arguing for a deep respect/honor for the dead and ancestor worship is still walked among modern scholars. For example, see P.H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1982), p. 133.



supporting actors. Any other characters would be represented by carved wooden effigies. Of the three different constituent part groupings, Phillpotts's position regarding the setting has the strongest evidential support, and there is also credible evidence to support her theories regarding the actors. There is little to support her thinking on the existence of a chorus.

Examining each in turn, Phillpotts's theory for the setting is compelling, as there are a number of references within the *Poetic Edda* that support it. In many of the poems, one can see a hall or grave mound in use for the setting. For the actors, the evidence for a *pulr* as a performer is also strong, but the type of performer is something that still requires further examination. It is noticeable that throughout *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, Phillpotts gave only marginal attention to the oral transmission of epic poetry. She presented the idea that the Norse originally had totemic rituals which evolved into dramatic plays. These plays were then committed to writing when they reached Iceland, which resulted in the *Poetic Edda* as we have it now. But nowhere in this progression did Phillpotts discuss a period when the poems were transmitted orally from person to person, a period most Norse scholars believe existed.<sup>782</sup> This is certainly not because she was unaware of the issue, as she talked around it in her actors section. Given the evidence provided regarding actors, one can easily imagine that the *pulr* is to be understood as a bard, a speaker that recites epic narratives. Yet, Phillpotts argued that there was more significance to the title than identifying someone who simply recites a narrative; the *pulr* recreate the scene with movement, props and actions. All of this she argued knowing that there is nothing in the *Poetic Edda* that firmly disproves the

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<sup>782</sup> As detailed on page 22. Also see A. Le Roy Andrews, 'The Criteria for Dating Eddic Poems', *PMLA*, 42 (1927), pp. 1044-54 for arguments concerning the difference between the present written form of the poems and their potential previous forms.

idea of a solitary speaker, and instead stoutly affirms the idea of a dramatic production.

Lack of good evidence is definitely an issue for her theory regarding character effigies. Phillpotts established that there was a tradition of idol representation for the gods in early Norse society, and even that these statues were thought to have a life of their own, but the evidence of this does not come from within the *Poetic Edda* and not in any use as effigies. Her reasoning is certainly possible, but there is no evidence to suggest it is fact. Additionally, Phillpotts failed to demonstrate the use of an effigy in a dramatic setting. She cited comparative examples of puppet plays from elsewhere in the world, but these are different from the wooden stand-ins that she was describing as existing in early Norse society.

This problem of having no direct evidence from within the *Poetic Edda* is most pronounced in Phillpotts's argument concerning the chorus. As she herself admitted, there simply is nothing within the narratives that even appears to be similar to a chorus. The only example she provided, the congregation at Baldr's funeral, does not appear in the *Poetic Edda*, it appears only in a hypothetical lost poem.

### *Summarizing the Nordic Material*

In her conclusion, as did the earlier Ritualists, Phillpotts returned to Aristotle's arguments for the origin of tragedy. The key point she focused on was the idea that Greek tragedy came about as a result of plots that were trivial and the overall style ludicrous. Concerning the Nordic material, Phillpotts argued, 'the plots of the mythological poems, the plot of the Sigurd trilogy, might fitly be described as slight or trivial, and the style is altogether lacking in sustained dignity.'<sup>783</sup> She

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<sup>783</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 191.

admitted that the ritual lamentation theory (of scholars such as Ridgeway) did have some credibility when examining the Baldr narrative, ‘but something more than grief, whether real or simulated, has gone to the making of Northern tragedy. The springs of tragedy are laid bare to us in these Helgi lays, and we can see that they arise directly out of what we may still call the Fertility-drama, in which the slain king is kinsman of the slayer.’<sup>784</sup> She went on to say, ‘the moral conflict, the family feud, the love-scene and the hint of re-birth—these are the tragic formulas with which we have to deal, and they are inexplicable except as springing from the soil of the ritual marriage and the ritual slaying.’<sup>785</sup> In this way, Phillpotts continued to carry on the tradition of Frazer, as well as that of the previous scholars of this chapter.

She was not a mere follower, though, completely accepting all their interpretive schemas. Instead Phillpotts argued that the Nordic rituals that lead to drama point ‘not to dances celebrating a vegetation-spirit or Eniautos-daimon, nor to Dionysiac revelries, but ultimately, to totemism’.<sup>786</sup> She agreed that the original rituals were based upon the preservation of fertility; however she was not willing to accept the dance inspired theories of Harrison.<sup>787</sup> Unfortunately, Phillpotts merely dropped this assertion into her conclusion with barely any explanation or support. Her only justification for it was that ‘the sacrifice of the Yule boar must have originated earlier than the slaying of the prince dressed up to represent him; just as the idea of the Sow divinity must be earlier than the idea of the goddess Freyja with the sow as her emblem and title’.<sup>788</sup> While this is a valid and logical observation, it

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<sup>784</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 192.

<sup>785</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 193.

<sup>786</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 194.

<sup>787</sup> One assumes she means this to connect with her arguments of early Nordic tribal practices, but no connection is made. See Bertha Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974).

<sup>788</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. 194.

is surely not sufficient as a basis to claim that Nordic rituals arose out of the veneration of local animals or plants. To bolster that claim, she would have been better served simply to refer back to her arguments on theriomorphic personages and the frequent use of animal disguises in Norse poetry. One may assume the previous arguments formed the basis for her conclusion, but they receive no attention in her collection of final thoughts. Perhaps in the end one must allow that Phillpotts did what she set out to do. Recall, in her Preface to *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, she said she would ‘be satisfied if I have made clear the grounds which have forced me to formulate the theory: should there be any truth in it, others, better fitted than I, will work it out’.<sup>789</sup>

## **Chapter Conclusions**

The stated goal of this chapter was to examine how well several early twentieth century scholars argued for their theories regarding a dramatic origin of myth, and then specifically how well their methodologies applied to Old Norse material. A substantial number of instances were examined in which one could see the theories of Harrison, Murray and Cornford applying to Old Norse narratives, specifically those centered on Baldr and Freyr. Phillpotts also brought to light numerous ways in which parts of Old Norse narratives suggested that they had a previous incarnation as dramatic performance. However, a significant number of problems were revealed.

For the Ritualists and their idea that a hypothetical *Eniautos-Daimon* existed among the Norse, the primary issue is the same as was encountered with Frazer.

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<sup>789</sup> Phillpotts, *Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, p. vii.

Their reliance on the events revolving around the character of Baldr is problematic for two main reasons. First, it relies heavily on the reworked account of Snorri and to a far less degree on the *Poetic Edda*. Second, the Ritualists were arguing for a drama that involves worship, often incorporating archaeological finds into their scholarship, yet the evidence of worship of Baldr in Norse locales is weak, especially relative to the other deities of the Norse Pantheon. This brings us to the second difficulty. In order to form a parallel to the Greek characters, upon whom the Ritualists based their theories, an amalgamation of several Old Norse characters has to occur, some of whom have little to suggest any commonality, such as Freyr and Baldr.

The two principle ideas put forth by Phillpotts, that certain themes and constituent parts within the *Poetic Edda* existed because the poems were previously dramas, both suffer from the same problem of heavy reliance on Snorri. Additionally, Phillpotts claims all her examples are similar to the wider genre of ‘ancient primitive drama’, but assumes the content of this genre was familiar to the reader so she never makes the effort to explain what this means or to provide any concrete examples.

Like all of the scholars examined previously, the individuals of this chapter ask the reader to make leaps of academic faith. There is benefit in doing so, because the Ritualists deliberately did try to provide an answer to the question of how a myth began, or rather how the ritual came into being that would later spawn the myth. In like manner, Phillpotts made important arguments regarding the origins of the narratives contained in the *Poetic Edda*. However, faith is one thing, proof is another, especially when one is analyzing the first stage of myth creation. Harrison could provide no proof that dances such as those of the Cretians were the beginnings

of all Greek mythology. The idea that spontaneous dancing occurred in early tribal communities is certainly plausible, but that this eventually evolved into all the mythological narratives a community composed is difficult to accept.

## Conclusions

In some ways, the goal of this study is not unlike that articulated by Phillpotts. Given the constraints of time and space, the preceding chapters should be seen as initial investigations into the applicability of the central tenants of the methodologies of these 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century myth scholars, and not comprehensive examinations that test every aspect of their lives' work. The objective has been to demonstrate how the methodological approach of each scholar or set of scholars can be applied to Old Norse myths, and to reveal the apparent strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

### Scholarship That Followed

This is not to suggest that myth scholarship stopped with Phillpotts's 1920 publication. New approaches and theories continued to emerge. Some of these built directly upon the ideas examined in this study and others went in completely new directions.

#### *Parallel Lines*

Of the general approaches to myth scholarship examined in this study as they relate to Old Norse mythology, three continued to receive a significant amount of attention in the twentieth century. The first was a resurrection of interest in the Proto Indo-Europeans, the second a more focused examination of Old Norse magic, and finally, the third was an explanation and revision of Phillpotts's ideas on early Norse drama.

## Revived Indo-Europeans: George Dumézil

After the death of Müller, his theories had few strong advocates.

Correspondingly, the search for the Proto Indo-Europeans ('Aryans') became less and less a priority for scholars. The search was revitalized in the mid-twentieth century, however, in large part due to the work of a French scholar, George Dumézil. His theories were mostly comparative, but also structural in orientation.<sup>790</sup> Dumézil held that a common thread could be seen in the way the Indo-European people associated their deities. Cultures tended to divide the functions of their deities into three distinct groups:

- 1) Those responsible for maintaining order among the people;
- 2) The warriors who served to defend the people;
- 3) Those who assured sustenance and fertility for the people.

Dumézil argued that characters like Óðinn were similar to the Vedic Mitra and Roman Jupiter in fulfilling the first role. Þórr was related to Indra and Mars as the protector of the people, and the father/son combination of Freyr and Njörðr were fertility providers similar to the Greek Dioscuri, Vedic Áśvins or Roman Quirinus.<sup>791</sup>

The theories of Dumézil were, and continue to be, well received by myth scholars. The strength of his approach is that it is not overly complex or reliant on a specific aspect of one particular culture. Dumézil argued less for the mindset of the hypothetical individual that created the myth and more for a practice common to human beings. In this way he was following the example of evolutionary thinkers like Lang and Tylor, but Dumézil cleverly avoided getting bogged down by trying to

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<sup>790</sup> See below on page 331 for a summary of structuralism as relates to myth.

<sup>791</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. by Einar Haugen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).



take things one step further and theorize on the overall development of human beings as a species.

### **Magic: Neil Price**

For a more focused, and Nordic, example, the subject of magic, spells and sorcery among the Old Norse has enjoyed a considerable amount of popularity in the late 20-th century. Along the anthropological and archaeological lines of Lang, the contemporary scholar Neil Price has endeavoured to understand the practices of early Norsemen.<sup>792</sup> With a methodology similar to that of Lang, Frazer and especially the Ritualists, Price uses every avenue available for source material. Archaeological finds from grave sites and literary descriptions of events form the bulk of his investigation, but Tylor's principle of survivals is still very much in use as Price examines shamanic practices of the contemporary Sámi people from northern Scandinavia to paint a picture of possible ancient Norse activities. However, the difference between Price and the scholars examined above is that his investigation and examples are very focused. While the aboriginal tribes of Australia may have practices similar to that of the Sámi, he does not extrapolate to say this is something that will help the reader to understand the practices of the early Norse.

Like Lang who focused most of his attention on the study of 'magic', much of Price's work is concentrated around the Old Norse term *seiðr*. As noted previously, the exact meaning of this term is a source of debate in the academic community, but using the methods set forth above, Price lays out the possible uses and details for *seiðr* among the Norse. As Lang argued for primitive magic in

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<sup>792</sup> See page 306 for citation details.

general, Price argues that Norse magic involved both destructive and protective elements as well as certain key figures responsible for the community's magical needs. While Price makes use of details contained in the *Poetic Edda*, those textual details are mainly starting blocks from which he can launch his arguments. The bulk of his supporting evidence comes from archaeological finds and as such he can be seen as a good example of the recent primacy of material goods over written testament.

### **Drama: Terry Gunnell**

Phillipotts's stated goal was to provide a starting point for future scholars to build upon. However, due to the negative reviews, such as Andreas Heusler's, that followed her publications, this challenge was not taken up in a serious way for many years.<sup>793</sup> It was not until 1995 that a major effort was made to investigate the ideas Phillipotts had postulated seventy years prior. In *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, Terry Gunnell took the basic ideas that were examined in chapter four of this study and re-evaluated them with a much more comprehensive examination of Old Norse literature and Scandinavian folklore.<sup>794</sup>

Gunnell did not vindicate all of Phillipotts's theories and was fairly critical of her conclusions: 'she goes too far, bases too much on general assumption, and tried too hard to fit the Eddic poems within the myth-ritual framework suggested by Murray and the Cambridge school.'<sup>795</sup> However, Gunnell still made the argument that many of the poems in the *ljóðaháttir* metre have strong potential for a dramatic origin. He differs from Phillipotts in that he dismisses the heroic poems such as

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<sup>793</sup> Andreas Heusler, 'Anmälän: Bertha Phillipotts, The Elder Edda and ancient Scandinavian drama', *ANF*, 38 (1922), 347-353.

<sup>794</sup> Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

*Helgaqviða Hiqrvarðzsonar* and *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana* as containing indicators of performance, sources that Phillpotts's arguments relied upon heavily. Instead, Gunnell narrows his focus to certain *Poetic Edda* poems like *Fáfnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Lokasenna*, *Skírnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* as potential sources for early drama. His conclusions are also more tentative, as Gunnell does not argue for an entire dramatic production or the constituent parts as Phillpotts did, nor does he conclude along Ritualist lines that there is a Year-Spirit or totemic connection. He certainly sees and presents evidence that strongly suggests a tradition of ritual inspired drama in pre-Christian Scandinavia, agreeing with many of Phillpotts's themes (incremental repetition, supernumerary characters, prose descriptions), but as with Dumézil, he is unwilling to fall into the trap to which earlier scholars succumbed and so avoids hypothesizing regarding the initial origins of these dramas or rituals.

### *Divergent Lines*

While the impetus for continuing investigation was not specifically because of Old Norse material, the study of mythology went in several dramatic new directions following the work of the Ritualists. This is not to say, however, that scholars have shied away from using these new methods to interpret Norse material.

### **Psychology**

The psychological approach to myth is based on the work of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud concerning the unconscious mind. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their theories dramatically altered the way scholars approached

the study of human endeavours, and therefore the study of mythology was similarly affected.

Freud argued that a person's subconscious could be examined with an analysis of their dreams. Through this, one could learn about the forces that were affecting or had affected the person, thereby explaining why they committed certain actions. Societies also had forces that affected their development, and the argument of myth scholars following a Freudian approach was that myths were a society's form of dreams. In other words, hidden inside the imagery of a society's mythological narratives were clues to the forces affecting that society. The interpretative tools needed to identify these forces were the same as those used for an individual person. So, the methods used for dream interpretation were applied to myths.<sup>796</sup> A monster within a person's dream was a symbol for evil. Similarly, a monster within a society's myths was also a symbol for evil. Though using myth as a window to an ancient culture was not a new idea, suggesting that society as a whole had a collective unconsciousness and using the same interpretive scheme as that which was used for dreams certainly was a new direction.

Freud, like many other scholars examined in this study, saw society as an evolving entity that went through different stages as it developed, a process that he called phylogenetic development. This was similar to the development he saw in human beings, called ontogenetic development. When a person was experiencing psychological problems, Freud used his dream analysis to determine what stage of the individual's development the problem stemmed from because different stages left different marks on the person. For a society, the argument was extended to say that

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<sup>796</sup> In fact Jung argued that a myth and a dream could not be distinguished from one another. Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1916), p. 29.

an analysis of their myths could indicate what stage of development the society was in.

Jung believed that society had a collective unconscious and that within the myths a society created were what he called ‘archetypes’. These were often significant characters that represented larger psychological ideas or needs. A nurturing or protecting woman would likely be classed as the ‘Great Mother’ archetype, an individual who represented the human need for shelter and fertility.<sup>797</sup>

Old Norse material has not been overlooked in terms of psychological interpretation. One example is that of Greg Mogenson who recently published *Northern Gnosis*, a text that interprets several aspects of the Old Norse mythological system from the perspectives of both Jung and Freud. For example, when considering Þórr:

the mythical mud in which Thor gets stuck corresponds to infantile sexuality’s regressive hold, his powerful throwing hammer Mjöllnir, to sexuality itself. The Rainbow Bridge and the council chambers in the branches of the World Ash, Yggdrasill, correspond, by contrast, to the cultural uses to which libido can be applied, providing that infantile forms of gratification can be renounced and their regressive longings sublimated.<sup>798</sup>

Here one can see the importance of determining what specific characters or objects represent in relation to the unconscious mind and sexuality. Mogenson is admittedly a difficult read, but his work demonstrates that the psychological approach to myth, and Norse myth specifically, is still in use among scholars.

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<sup>797</sup> See *Man and his Symbols*, ed. by Carl Jung (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964) for a general introduction.

<sup>798</sup> Greg Mogenson, *Northern Gnosis: Thor, Baldr, and the Volsungs in the thought of Freud and Jung* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2005), p. 7.

## Structuralism

Another method of interpretation was provided in the mid-twentieth century by the developing idea of Structuralism. Pioneered by scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, this theory held that human beings acted according to universal structures. It was based on linguistics, but not the etymological interpretations seen in Müller. For literature and myths, the importance became the underlying structure with which narratives were put together. In a way, the Ritualists such as Cornford and Murray were earlier proponents of this theory without knowing what they were heralding. The simplest example is that of Lévi-Strauss' binary oppositions. The idea is that when humans create a story, they do so by contrasting things against one another with some form of mediation between the opposing forces. There is a hero, there is a villain and there is a battle to determine the victor. A person or thing is not defined by what it is, but rather by what it is not. In other words, you cannot understand light without darkness. You cannot understand good without evil.<sup>799</sup>

The great strength of Structuralism when applied to myth is that it almost never requires a part of the narrative to be disregarded. In many of the examples in the previous chapters, it was seen that in order to apply their theories, large portions of the poems were left unexamined because they did not contribute anything to the theory. Consider the long list of threats in *Skírnismál*. Müller would argue that the only significance was an interaction between a sun representation and an earth

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<sup>799</sup> For a comprehensive study of such oppositions in Old Norse material, ranging from the gods and giants to the dwarves and the ground, see E. Meletinskij, 'Scandinavian Mythology as a System', *Journal of Symbolic Anthropology*, 2 (1974), pp. 57-78.

representation. Lang would want to focus on the rune carved stick that Skírnir was backing up his threats with, while Smith would argue that ritual threatening was a persuasion tactic among the Norse, and Phillpotts would have the reader consider the movement that appears to have happened before and after the passage. With the exception of Lang, who is only interested in one part of a very long section, these scholars are not addressing the vivid imagery the poet created with this passage. However, the structuralist can examine each strophe and see the opposing forces of positive and negative that the poet has woven into the text, yet this too comes at the cost of ignoring the 'vivid' characteristics the poet adds. The oppositions and pairings always take precedence over any linguistic nuance or word play.

As a result, some scholars thought that structuralism was too rigid and deterministic in the way it interpreted human action and behaviour. As a result, the catch-all discipline loosely defined as 'post-structuralism' emerged. This does not refer to any one particular scholar or theory, but rather the varied collection of ideas that were in some way opposed to structuralism. One example of this is the Queer Theory of Judith Butler or Michael Warner, which argued that what was considered 'different' in a society would be omitted, demonized or written out of their mythology. So in Norse material, entities that were marginalized, such as dwarves and elves, or demonized like the giants, were considered the outsiders and according to this theory would be important to study to get a better picture of the Norse society that created these narratives. For example, one should see the Æsir as the dominant group and perhaps Loki as an indication of the repressed 'different'. Alternatively, the treatment of women was also used as a common window to society by Queer theorists or the Marxist-like interpretations of the scholar Roland Barthes which focused on what literary imagery meant, or rather signified, to society, especially

what he saw as the bourgeois class. The poem *Rígsþula* and the imagery associated with the different families would be a goldmine for Barthes's interpretations.<sup>800</sup>

### **Poetic Edda Verdict**

Since the stated goal of this study was to examine how applicable the myths contained in the *Poetic Edda* were to the interpretive methods of certain scholars, the final question remains as to which seem to work best, a question that is essentially unanswerable. However, what can be said is that all of the scholars examined have left their mark on myth scholarship.

The work of Müller has fared the worst in the modern academic environment. One is forced to make too many leaps of academic faith based on his etymological arguments. *Skírnismál* was shown to be the most receptive of the *Poetic Edda* poems to his sun-worship theory, but *Lokasenna* also required a considerable amount of alteration to make it fit with Müller's ideas. Add to this the considerable complication that many of his proposed etymologies have been disproven by later scholars. Still, the most basic element of his theories, that the names a culture gives to its deities have significance, is an idea not likely to be discarded.

The works of Lang and Tylor certainly still have influence to this day. The concept of survivals has become entrenched in the academic mindset and, as seen above, scholars are still working on primitive magic as a defining characteristic of early societies. The *Poetic Edda* definitely demonstrates elements of both their work, suggesting a system of totemic tree worship among the early Norse. This was

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<sup>800</sup> For an argument that *Rígsþula* explains the origin of the class system in Germanic society, see Theodor Fuchs, 'Ueber die Bedeutng des Rígs-Mál', *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 9 (1880), pp. 142-54.



a theme that continued into the work of Frazer. However, here was a scholar who, while focusing specifically on an Old Norse narrative that is first attested to in the *Poetic Edda*, makes little actual use of the *Poetic Edda* to document his argument. While the expanded work of Snorri and other medieval Icelandic writers certainly help substantiate parts of Frazer's argument, further suggesting a system of tree worship, one would have to admit that the *Poetic Edda* alone does not sufficiently support the weight of Frazer's conclusions. As for his methods, few scholars employ the random sampling of anthropological data as Frazer did, and a return to his methods seems all but impossible.

Finally, the argument for drama or theatrical origins of the *Poetic Edda* poems still garners support. As with Frazer, the bolstering details of Snorri are essential in places, but many of the themes of both the Ritualists and Phillpotts can be found within the poems. Elements of both Murray's tragedy and Cornford's comedy can be seen in the story of Baldr and *Lokasenna*, though Murray does require more reliance on Snorri's account than the evidence presented within the *Poetic Edda*. Phillpotts's use of evidence from Norse sources still is given credence. However her conclusions are seen to have over-reached the evidence she supplied. But her work specifically has been validated to a large degree by the comprehensive work of more recent scholars.

In conclusion, there are no definitive answers to all possible questions regarding the origins and meanings of myths contained within the *Poetic Edda* that have been overlooked in the methodologies of these scholars, but it is undeniable that they form the basis for future scholarship. However, and thankfully for those that have chosen this particular field, there are still plenty of unanswered questions.



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